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The Yelping: Essays and Stories

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The Yelping: Essays and Stories

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

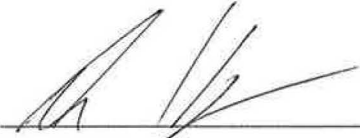
Anthony Marvullo

2018

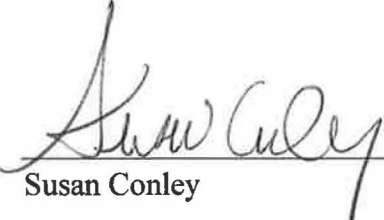
THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

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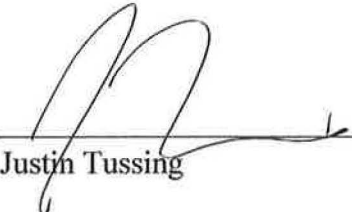
We hereby recommend that the thesis of Anthony Marvullo entitled *The Yelping: Essays and Stories* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts.



Aaron Hamburger Advisor



Susan Conley Reader



Justin Tussing Director

Accepted



Adam-Max Tuchinsky Dean, College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

Abstract

The Yelping is a collection of essays and short stories that focus thematically on the evolution of a relationship from courtship to marriage. The essays explore loneliness and ego and identity and mortality, while the short stories do the same, except under the guise of fiction. Many of the pieces start with a minor misunderstanding or a failure of communication, and the humor and crises that result.

Acknowledgements

I owe this collection of work—and forthwith all subsequent collections—to Emily, my partner, my copilot, my wife, whose patience and compassion dilute my default saltiness.

Additionally, I wish to acknowledge my mentors—Rick Bass, T Fleischmann, Deb Marquart, and Aaron Hamburger—my workshop leaders, and my peers, without whom my writing would be stale and static. Each of them has guided me to this point. If they were to ever cross their arms and fall backwards in trust, I would catch them, as they have caught me.

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Preface

While it took me two days to complete the required essays for my application to Stonecoast, my wife Emily—who was my girlfriend before she was my fiancée—spent the years between 2012 and 2016 preparing for a graduate program in occupational therapy. Because she went to art school for sculpture, she was underqualified to enter a program in the health fields, so she cobbled together a quick course-load equivalency in her free time, taking prerequisite premed courses at various community colleges. At the same time, our relationship was growing in intimacy and scope in such a way that conversations about marriage were commonplace and unfrightening. I was working my first nine-to-five office job with a two-hour daily commute, while she was inside of a scattershot self-made curriculum. A wedding was something we could plan together, could control and shape into something that, while not totally familiar, could at least take on structure.

This is something I'm proud of: we picked out an engagement ring at a jeweler near my office and set up a payment plan that would allow her to pay off the first half of the ring. I would pay the remainder and then pick up the ring, at which point it was my responsibility to choose the time and place to ask her to marry me.

By the time I reached the end of the layaway, we had moved closer to my job and Em took work as a teacher in a school for children with autism while continuing her prerequisite classes for an OT program. One day on my lunch break, on a payday, I walked down to the jeweler to remit what I thought was the fifth of six payments on the ring. I miscounted. It was in fact the final payment, and as the clerk commented on how

she saw the color flee my face when she handed me the case containing an engagement ring, I thought about how I am not a man of visible passions or of overt displays. I am a man whose reticence people mistake sometimes for mystery and allure. Joke's on them, though: it's all anxiety.

A marriage proposal is a story you will tell for the rest of your life or the rest of your marriage. It isn't something you can avoid or couch in metaphor or place in a subtext of an essay about food—no, it is set squarely in realism. I walked back to my office with a new piece of jewelry and I needed to figure out how to give it to Emily so that we'd both be happy to tell the story.

#

Any reasonable person should pursue a degree in something interesting to them, regardless of its practical applications or chances at gainful employment. On a timeline running parallel to my own—let's call it Earth-2—a pragmatic version of myself earned a marketing degree and found a career writing humanizing tweets for Tide Low-Paraben Detergent Pods or Pik-Nik Original Shoestring Potato Stix. On Earth-2, I'm already dead.

For a while, in my present timeline, I did write humanizing tweets for an educational publishing company on the New Hampshire Seacoast, but I stayed alive. The company's building was in an old mill and the president's office was at one time the foreman's, with a large window overlooking the first floor's open concept layout. Often, I would look up from my cube and see the president standing at her upright desk or leading a meeting with the department heads. I disliked my job and I hated being in the office but I loved her, her shoulder-length hair that framed her round, young face, her wardrobe of

purple, her constant use of corporatized jargon like, “This book will really galvanize our base,” and, “Let’s circle back on that in the next stand-up.”

My direct supervisor was a local news station refugee, whose job title was Social Marketing Director. When he came to the publishing company, people knew already who he was because of his “Trending Now!” segment on the six- and eleven-o’clock news, where he took questions from the anchors and signed off with an update on new internet content, like a video of a cat riding a robo-vacuum or a troubling fresh lexicon your teens are using to sext each other during homeroom. The rush of finding enough news for baby boomers to watch during dinner had exhausted him, so he looked for a career change and landed this middle management marketing directing gig and a 4’ by 6’ office. When I opened his door for our weekly check-ins, I hit the corner of his desk.

He liked to talk about clicks and audience engagement and search engine optimization and pivoting to video. That last one irked me. My job was to write blog posts and tweets to promote our company’s newest books, dreadful 180-page ordeals about soft-focus pedagogy that shook my faith in English teachers, for if they can’t write well, then we’re looking at an exponential cliff in terms of this country’s language arts facility. At each check-in, my supervisor and I planned the next week’s blog posts and tweets and status updates. We plugged the content into a scheduling program so that we would only ever need to hit the button once for five days of online marketing material. That kind of all-at-once workflow made the remaining thirty-eight hours of my work week a shamble toward the weekend.

#

I proposed to Emily on the summit of Dorr Mountain in Acadia National Park. That was my call: even if I tripped over the question, even if it was raining or too windy and I had to repeat myself, I proposed to her on a mountaintop and that's a fun story to tell at parties.

She didn't respond right away. She cried. I cried. I stood up from kneeling and hugged her. "Do you want to answer my question?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "Yes."

I slid the ring onto her finger and we sat down to eat lunch. People summited the mountain, took panoramic photos of the view on their phones, poured water out for their leashed, panting dogs, and nobody noticed us: two people spooning tuna and mayo onto Triscuits, who had just changed their lives together.

#

Where I thrived at work was in the rules of internet writing. They were simple, according to my boss: Nothing over six hundred words and all of it "chunked" or in list form. Nobody reads six hundred words or more on the internet unless there's something in it for them like a Harry Potter character quiz or a picture of a naked person. The title of a piece of online content should both intrigue the potential audience and interrogate something you didn't know was an issue in the first place. One example: "Why It's Important Now More Than Ever To Have Students Take Their Shoes Off Before Math Class." Another example: "How One Teacher Changed Her School's Homeroom Culture With A Single Word." Don't you want to read that? Don't you want to find out what that word was? Was it a swear? What was wrong with the homeroom culture before? Were

the students sexting each other? What is homeroom culture? Should I be worried about it?

During this time, my writing became a boring mix of marketing-speak and teacher lingo. As a way to keep the knives sharp, I started a creative writing habit in earnest: at least thirty minutes every day after work, no specific word count, no specific audience. Because I was using the milquetoast part of my brain at work—writing straightforward ad copy for a mid-range educational publishing company—the stuff I was producing on my own time in the early evening was more dynamic in a way I hadn’t seen since college. I wrote restaurant reviews but made them impractical for potential customers. I wrote a series of recommendations as if they were out of the Better Business Bureau, but they were for abstractions: your name, a weather pattern, the feeling of Sunday afternoon dryer lint. Over one week of nightly writing sessions, I tried to write as many words as possible about my commute. I got as high as 25,000 words, all of them useless. Still, I was writing.

I was reading, too, specifically a ton of George Saunders, whose tightly wound and put-upon characters frighten me as a mirror in the nighttime—you pass it on the way to the bathroom and wonder if that shadow is you. Saunders’s characters are cartoons drawn in the extreme of American excesses, but the satire stands somehow because of his deft writing. In his story, “The 400-Pound CEO,” Saunders gave me a mantra, during a scene in which his main character sits at his cubicle and pities himself:

All day Wednesday I prepare to tell Tim off. But I’m too scared. [...] Instead I drop a few snots in his coffee cup and use my network access privileges to cancel his print jobs. He asks can I work late and in spite of myself I fawningly say sure.

I hate him. I hate myself. Everybody else goes home. Big clouds roll in. I invoice like mad. Birds light on the dumpster and feed on substances caked on the lid. What a degraded cosmos. What a case of something starting out nice and going bad (57).

Applying to the Stonecoast MFA Program was part of an exit strategy to get out of my job, which had so eroded my élan that I was no longer gleaning pleasure from things like receiving the tenth stamp on a sub shop loyalty card or crunching my heel into a patch of ice in late fall. Every day in that office was another experience in backbiting, small talk, and the dissonant hum of the American work week ricocheting off the ceiling of the open floor building plan. I had no peers, no members of my own demographic, read: fellow millennials. A thirty-minute-a-day writing habit was not enough to stem this malaise. I had promised Emily that I wouldn't quit unless there was another plan in place. Options were: another digital marketing job, freelance writing gigs, taking a long walk off a short pier, and graduate school. I applied to Stonecoast.

In his introduction to a piece by Barry Lopez in *The Next American Essay* anthology, editor John D'Agata quotes from another Lopez piece. Lopez writes:

I know I can derive something useful from this world if I can get a reader to say, "I am an adult, I have a family, I pay bills, I live in a world of chicanery and subterfuge and atomic weaponry and inhumanity and round-heeled politicians and garrulous, insipid television personalities, but still I have wonder" (22).

I didn't read D'Agata's three-volume essay anthology until my second semester at Stonecoast, but that quote would have made sense to me on the day I had an informational interview with Stonecoast's Associate Director Robin Talbot, right as I

applied to the program. Robin told me of the program's community, enthusiasm, culture of gratitude, and collaborative thinking. These were the buzzwords I needed to hear, the elements my writing life was lacking. She wasn't lying—I found within Stonecoast an enthusiastic and grateful community. During that interview with Robin, on that bright fall morning nearly three years ago, she handed me a Stonecoast-branded flat pencil that didn't fit any regular pencil sharpener. A metaphor, I thought at the time. In my application to the program, I wrote:

If I am going to return to school for anything, it should be something I sustain a passion for. I write because it is how I place myself in the world; it is how I develop empathy and the hope that other people will feel that empathy. If Stonecoast were to give me the opportunity and the space to improve my craft, to write and edit and read and workshop, then I would figure out how to sharpen that pencil Robin Talbot gave me in October, and I would show up to work.

On my twenty-ninth birthday, Robin called me to accept me into the program. I quit my job within a month.

#

Never at Stonecoast did a mentor or fellow writer try to move me from where I pitch my tent: in the hinterlands between funny and sad, at the center of wry cynicism and tempered anger. Most of the pieces in here have an element of subterranean rage, something that Theodora Goss pointed out in her cross-genre "Secrets and Revelations" workshop I attended early on in my time at the program. "This is funny," she said, referring to my story about a man who calls himself the Beer Master, and whose life

flattens out because his job as a cicerone leads to occupational alcoholism. “But there is darkness here, and you should dive in.”

This sort of feedback became a regular occurrence. Susan Conley, a leader in three of my Stonecoast workshops, told me to go deeper when I wrote about my relationship with Emily. Susan saw over time how that relationship was evolving and helped me to articulate it. Often in a creative nonfiction workshop, when we hear the feedback that we should go deeper in our writing, it can feel like cruel and unusual punishment. The work we do in the workshop setting—telling our raw and unapologetic stories—is safe and sacred, so when we hear that our writing is flitting above the surface and that we need to spend time in the layered darkness beneath, it’s something that doesn’t ever feel good. It’s necessary, however self-flagellating. Though this sounds like I didn’t come away with learning, each time in her workshops, Susan told me to go deeper, to plumb the depths, so that my writing would feel more dynamic.

Later on, I would understand this as an “Emotional EKG.” If you think of your writing as an electrocardiogram display with its heartbeat spikes and inherent drama, then a flat line is no good. A flat line is death. Even if the flat line represents the humor of a piece—which it often does in my writing—it is still a flat line. If I portray my relationship with Emily as something that is built on fun and playfulness, then that is only one facet of the experience, because people clash, especially people who live together and share bills and sleep in the same bed. Susan told me as much in my first semester, and Rick Bass said the same in his second semester CNF workshop. The EKG metaphor stretched and morphed among faculty members, but the feedback remained the same: in order for the good times to be had, the bad times had to be felt. In Rick’s workshop, he

drew on the chalkboard what looked like the outline of a clam, wavy like a bivalve mollusk. He drew this clam twice. On the first clam, he put a straight line through the middle of the wavy stuff.

“You don’t want this,” he said. “This is nothing. Nothing happens, nothing is gained.” Then he drew a dynamic, up-and-down line between the mollusk’s valves. “This is what you want. Something happens, something is lost, something is gained, then it ends.” I took a picture of the clams with my phone and sent it to my friend Daniel. I told Daniel that the eminent and slightly unhinged writer Rick Bass—who one day earlier had won the \$10,000 Story Prize—drew some clams in reference to my nonfiction and that I’d never been more heard as a writer.

Later that afternoon, I attended an experimental writing seminar with Porochista Khakpour in the same room. She erased the clams to make room for an idea she was wrestling during the session. “There goes my clam,” I said to myself. But whatever form that metaphor took—clams, electrocardiograms, barometers—I understood it. I know now that if I am to write about Emily, if I am to write about anything at all, I need to understand its dark facets, its deep depth, its shadowy glooms that exist in opposition to the playful good humor of my default manner.

With that line of thinking, one could assume that humor is born of darkness. I believe that. The belief remained throughout my time at Stonecoast. Deb Marquart, my second semester mentor, encouraged me to read Nicholson Baker and Julie Schumacher, two writers who use humor to tell a story of melancholy. Baker’s *The Mezzanine* takes place, on its surface level, during a single escalator ride, though the protagonist’s trains of thought comprise the bulk of the text. There are footnotes and there are breathless,

endless descriptions of the contents of the man's bag—and these combine to form a thought: I read a 140-page book about an escalator ride for graduate school and it was exhausting.

#

It wasn't just the Baker book that exhausted me. During my semester with Deb I was also planning my wedding. Every night Emily and I sat at our dining room table and looked at the twenty pages of checklists in a planning book we bought off Pinterest. While we were discussing the pros and cons of DJs versus full bands, I was writing fiction and nonfiction about commitment—the fear surrounding it, the excitement of it, the interminable volume of it.

One afternoon, while I was writing and unresponsive as a fiancé, Em came home and hid her just-bought wedding dress in our bedroom closet. My third packet of writing was due to Deb on the weekend of the ceremony, and to this day I'm not entirely sure I submitted the work in full.

#

Julie Schumacher's *Dear Committee Members* is an epistolary novel, though there is no back-and-forth of normal letter-writing. Schumacher's beleaguered professor Jayson Fitger writes letters of recommendation for students and peers to a number of organizations, but his m.o. in letter writing is whimsical and perhaps not too productive. His shoulder's chip formed when he became a professor and not an eminent literary figure as some of his peers had during their time together at a famous Iowa Writers Conference analogue called "Bentham" in the novel. Thus, Professor Fitger places much

of his energy in attempting to get his protégé student named Darren Browles—himself a tortured but flighty young writer—into the Bentham program.

The book is funny—it won the Thurber American Humor prize—and the light tone gives way to one of my favorite techniques in writing: using humor to kneecap your readers. When a joke lands, it's successful, but when it lands in shadow, it's effect on pathos is invaluable. For example, Professor Fitger's protégé Browles dies by suicide near the end of the book, and Fitger attempts to set up a trust in his name to save future students from the same fate. Up to this point, the book was a long structured joke about an English professor who no longer writes creatively because he's writing only letters of recommendation, but now that something tragic has happened, Fitger course-corrects:

I suppose this is the last letter of recommendation anyone will write for poor Browles, so let me say this about him. Socially, he was awkward—shy, I suppose—and his writing at times was subpar; but an idea had presented itself to him, knocking at his brain like a nighttime traveler, and instead of shutting the door in its face, Browles built it a fire, he drew a chair for it up to the hearth and spent half a decade trying to decipher and then convey what it struggled to tell him (171).

What was ostensibly a book about a man past his prime, living vicariously through students and through his letters of recommendation, *Dear Committee Members* ends with what I feel is just about the most honest verdict on creative writing I've ever read. I don't believe this would have affected me so if the novel weren't structured this way, and if it weren't as funny.

So, the two through lines of my Stonecoast experience: using humor to undergird the deep darkness, and hiding a low-simmering fury within my wit. Each mentor and workshop leader worked with me toward some level of mastery in this, while also making sure I didn't lose a sense of human drama: no sunshine without rain, no summer without winter. The pieces herein should hopefully reflect the hard work and faith these people put in or into me. I am grateful for them.

What you have here then is a collection of stuff that was formless and neglected until my mentors and peers rehabilitated it. Some of this writing remains formless or unfinished, and in no way is this a slight against my cohort. If this thesis has an arc, then it's the evolution of my relationship to my wife, who was my girlfriend when I first thought to apply to Stonecoast, my fiancée when I got into Stonecoast, and now my wife. Though I flitted around genres during my time in the program, the work dealt usually with how I was experiencing the world as a boyfriend, then a fiancée, and now a husband. This thesis is for Emily, but you're allowed to read it as well.

The Yelping: An Introduction

What if a restaurant critic had a public and minor nervous breakdown? What if his editors didn't act responsibly, or if he had no editors at all? What if, in a crisis of confidence, the critic no longer reviewed an establishment but instead picked apart the minutiae—the staff, the seating, the lighting, the doorknobs on the restrooms—without considering them parts of the whole, and by that logic, *anything* about a restaurant is up for review, even the critic inside of it? What if I went to a restaurant to review myself?

How many stars would I give myself, what would be their limit, how many would I remove, almost certainly remove, on a reappraisal? What parts of my life net a star? The self-flagellation of my daily writing habit? The guilt—descending like a spiked ceiling in a tomb of booby traps—when I elect to do nothing or play video games or let the Netflix autoplay continue because it means an extra twenty-two minutes of inner quiet? What's that, like two stars? What's the rubric here?

Do I itemize, then quantify? Do I count the six months it took to dump a therapist and try out three other licensed chumps before I landed on my current, effective counselor? Or the number of times I requested, politely and with the diplomacy of a low-level employee, to have my workspace moved to a quieter part of the building, and was told no, politely and with the smooth grinding millstone force of a mid-size company's bureaucracy, that there wasn't another space?

Perhaps I should count only the positive aspects and let the daily pummeling of existence act as a baseline from which to escape with the stars I can bear. I was married last May—that was a high that hasn't left me—to a woman whom I marvel at, whose

compassion and humor dilute my default saltiness. I am writing. I have my health, my cats have theirs. My car has 250,000 miles on it, and it runs well.

How many stars?

#

The Yelping is a series of personal essays disguised as restaurant reviews. I try to be honest, both to myself and to these businesses.

Sonny's Tavern—Dover, New Hampshire

On Sunday evenings, my girlfriend Emily provides in-home support for a boy with autism. The boy's parents shop for groceries and then go out to eat at their favorite restaurant while ice cream thaws in the backseat of their car. They take these evenings for themselves as any adults with children would. Emily helps because she loves the boy. His good spirit is infectious.

As such, Em gives what she calls respite care for the boy and his family, I am left to my own devices in Dover, New Hampshire, and since my needs hierarchy has been distilled to FOOD > SHELTER > EMILY > SOLITUDE, I never remember in advance to make plans with friends, and so I leave the apartment to eat alone at a bar, an act that has grown into one of my favorite hobbies next to drunk-watching *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and ignoring work email.

Sonny's Tavern is located at 328 Central Avenue. It is six blocks from my apartment and next door to the Hidden History Tattoo Parlor. It occupies the former space of the Barley Pub, a restaurant that moved two years ago to the old bank building on Washington Street and Central Avenue in an effort to expand itself, and closed promptly thereafter because the number of restaurants with IPAs and middling Reuben sandwiches on the New Hampshire Seacoast is like two per capita.

I like Sonny's. Its default side dish to entrees is a kale salad dressed with a seeded, lemony vinaigrette. Over the winter, it introduced both a Cubano and a Reuben to its menu. These are Icarian sandwiches—so many ingredients that you can falter easily and burn out—but Sonny's makes its Cubano with the right amount of pickles and

mustard and its Reuben with the right amount of tissue-paper corned beef and off-brand “many islands” dressing.

The tavern is a single room with entrances on Central Avenue and Locust Street. I have never seen anyone enter from Locust Street, but I believe that it happens. The table and bar tops look to be made from reclaimed wood, perhaps from a barn and I am disheartened by the thought of hip city-dwellers having one less space on this earth for their weddings. Art hangs from the walls but the ambient lighting is such that I can provide no further description of the pieces.

The bar occupies the front half nearest Central Avenue while the back has a few community tables and a performance stage. The ceiling is all-black and the paint bleeds down over the bar and a ventilation unit, where the staff chalks nightly specials in a capitalized and perfectly horizontal penmanship. Whether the entire ceiling is a chalkboard—and not just the small wall space in patrons’ sight-lines—is something I’ve never asked or attempted to independently verify.

Strings of clear sixty-watt bulbs with off-yellow filaments flicker overhead, and two letters spelling “YO” illuminate the staircase to the basement kitchen. But the *piece de resistance* to the restaurant’s character is the single television that screens random feature films—*vérité* documentaries, *cinema nouvelle vague*, Russo-scientific fictions, Eastern European tone poems, pitch black neo noir, and melancholic black and white masterpieces—all overlaid with bold yellow subtitles, and always silent. Totally by accident, Sonny’s Tavern has become my professor in an unofficial film school education of auteur theory, visual literacy, and aesthetic studies.

#

Last Sunday before my weekly trip to Sonny's, I watched the documentary *Life Itself* on Netflix. It covers the film critic Roger Ebert's life with an uncanny, unflinching focus on his last days. I pressed play on this documentary expecting to cry in the same way we press play on embedded Facebook videos with titles like, "This golden retriever hasn't seen his Navy Seal veteran owner since basic training—you won't believe what happens next!"

During his last days, dying from cancer complications, Ebert embraced his exit, which is something I have never seen, not in life and definitely not on film. "I'll see you at the movies," he wrote on his web site two days before he died.

Death is a fascinating abstraction. In *Life Itself*, the director employs fading text to display email exchanges between himself and Ebert, because Ebert's thyroid cancer took his voice and he communicated instead with a laptop text-to-speech program. When Ebert is dying, the text shows his response to the director asking for another, last interview. "i can't," he wrote.

I left the apartment in a gray cloud, teary-eyed and on autopilot, and I couldn't remove the thought that we are all just meat fast-tracked for dirt and that I haven't contributed one goddamn iota to the high art or criticism of our collective humanity. Death is here, it is always here, and we carry it with us until it drops us. I thought of the line in *Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead*: "It's not gasps and blood and falling about—that isn't what makes death. It's just a man failing to reappear, that's all." I sought the solace and sustenance of Sonny's Tavern, its gaunt bartenders and their chalkboard scrawls.

#

I sat at the bar and ordered a beer and a Reuben sandwich. The bartender on duty was a man whose career I've been following since Emily and I were present for his first shift back in the fall, when he shadowed another employee and nodded as he learned where to keep the lemon slices and olives. Back then he didn't know a gin fizz from a martini but now here he was, his timing flawless, pulling the tap handle of a stout and walking away from it to stir bitters into a Manhattan.

The television played a black and white film from the late fifties or early sixties. A young man chain-smoked and looked pompous, his gaze—and the camera's—fixing on a young woman who I thought at first was Natalie Wood but then decided otherwise. The film jumped from scene to scene with French intertitles. I couldn't follow it and developed a sour opinion of the male lead. Who was he? Why did he sneer like that? Did he think about death *at all*? Or was it for him just another farce, another *burlesque*? In one scene, a man pulled a knife on the protagonist, but instead of going through with the mugging, the man stabs *himself* in the stomach! It cut away to another French intertitle.

I was so engrossed that I did not notice the bartender come over to me and ask if I wanted another drink. If the sound were on, I imagine it would have been sixties pop music, bouncy and fuzzy. I looked away from the screen. My glass was empty.

"Everyone is his own protagonist," said the bartender. He smiled.

#

Now: I am self-possessed. It took me thirty years to possess myself but I have done it and when I think of the work it took, the time on worn leather chairs in counselors' offices, the insurance deductibles, I tremble, I almost cry. Being a kid was lonely. High school was a fever dream of indecision. And my twenties held me in what I know now was

untreated anxiety and low-grade depression. Now I know the boundaries of my comfort zone and the unsafe hinterlands beyond. Now I can sit alone at a bar and enjoy a meal.

This is not to say that I am a fully realized individual, a man immune to the dings and dents of public embarrassment or self-conscious interactions. Being with Emily—and, in a kind of inversely logical way, having to fill my time in her absence—has changed the way I move and talk in this world. Now, with a partner, I am more aware of my composure, my reticence—and whether the two increase or decrease like bass and treble switches on a stereo. When we go out together, we split entrees because usually that's enough, and earlier this month she said, "I wish you would do the ordering more," referencing how when we split an entrée, only one of us needs to order it. She is usually the one to order it.

I told her OK, that we could keep a notepad of who ordered what when and whose turn it was, or I could say, "I will be having *half* the buffalo chicken wrap," and she could say, "And I'll have the other half," so that we're both talking, or we could practice ordering in unison like a pair of psychically connected twins in a horror movie.

"Don't be a dick," she said. "I'm saying that I feel like I'm doing all the talking in these moments. You're a person here, too." Then she ordered something she knew I wouldn't like to share, which was a big salad with a hard-boiled egg in it, and I said to our waiter, "I'll have the buffalo chicken wrap, all of it."

#

So at Sonny's, I interpreted the bartender's saying, "Everyone is his own protagonist" as a gesture of unsolicited and useless small talk on a night when my thoughts bore a maudlin and tired weight, more so with the Ebert documentary and the Sunday lonelies

and the now two beers and full dinner portion inside me. I did not respond with my best self.

“Not every bartender needs to be a sage,” I said.

“Oh, no, sorry,” said the bartender. “I was quoting a line from this movie. Do you want another drink?”

“Yes, I do,” I said. “Sorry.”

He left me alone and moved toward the taps, while I decided to redact this interaction when Em got home later and we talked about our evenings. On screen, the pompous teenager lit another cigarette and finished his Orangina. The camera didn’t follow him. My sandwich was great.

#

Verdict: Sonny’s gets two thumbs up, way up, rising with an emphatic velocity to pierce the troposphere.

White Heron Tea & Coffee Community—Portsmouth, New Hampshire

On Monday morning, the company Keurig malfunctioned, and the resulting human din of three dozen uncaffeinated coworkers shot out from the break room, up into the open foyer, and into the second-floor cube space where I sit and eat and fret over whether my emails convey a balance of personality and relevant information. It was 8:29 AM. I had been at my desk since 8:18 AM, and I measured that eleven minutes of silence with a precise, Zen relish.

At 8:53 AM, when the brazen throat-song did not relent, and instead roamed from its origin point, splintering throughout the building, echoing off the slatted ceiling and exposed beams, crescendoing like a tornado against a grain silo in the plains, I decided to leave the office to maintain some semblance of control over my sensory issues.

On the way out, I met Darren the marketing director in the too-small hallway, a hallway where if two people are approaching from opposite directions, one needs to yield. Darren didn't yield. "Back to the old grind, am I right?" he said. I curled my mouth up into the formation of a half-hearted smile and shrugged. "Well, gotta get to it." He paused, and as I moved to let him pass I saw that his shoes were plastic and that he probably washes them in his dishwasher because he saw it on a life-hacks blog, and that his unfilled sixteen-ounce coffee mug read *Working For The Weekend*. When I talk about work with my therapist—whom I see because of work, making this whole thing an anxious-making ouroboros—I tell her that I feel like I'm stuck in such a poorly written workplace sitcom that if one day I stood up and poured the soup I brought for lunch into the USB ports of my desktop computer, I wouldn't get in trouble, would only be subject

to a laugh track and my boss looking directly into the camera to say: *What can you do—*
He does good work!

Past the hallway, I dodged a violent salvo of “Mondays! Who needs ‘em?” and
“Don’t I know it!” and found the front door—the same one I’d entered thirty-five minutes
earlier—having told no one about my weekend, my commute, or the projected forecast.
Before the door closed, I heard Darren say, “Egad! This machine’s broken.”

#

White Heron Tea and Coffee Community is located at 601 Islington Street, Unit #103, in
the West End District of Portsmouth, New Hampshire. It occupies the former space of a
baby furniture retail outlet and is on the same block as a Sunoco gas station, a martial arts
finishing school, and a hybrid barber shop/psychic parlor.

Inside, the coffee shop is an L-shaped space with a tall ceiling and enough
windows to void any need for the paper lanterns that hang overhead. Six chalkboards to
the left of the counter—from the customer’s view—display the full food menu: wraps,
salads, rice bowls, daily specials, and a build-your-own-sandwich walkthrough (with its
own dedicated board).

The one dim spot of the coffee shop has a community sofa and is made dim
because a 4’x6’ square of high-density fiberboard covers the window there. The
fiberboard holds requisite coffee shop art. The community sofa holds people who are OK
with sitting on a community sofa.

#

At 9:40 AM, after the breakfast rush, White Heron Tea and Coffee Community is uniform and still. It is a dawn-lit pond before a brace of ducks. It is the slow fade-in of an establishing shot.

Instead of engaging people with whom I spend half my waking life, I come here. I walk away from my forthcoming, harmless colleagues and I self-exclude. Small-talk, however benign, is an invitation to my interior and I fear trespassers. I am not a swinging saloon door. I am a deadbolt lock.

#

I ordered a coffee and a toasted English muffin, received the seventh stamp on my ten-stamp loyalty card—good for one free medium beverage when fully stamped!—and sat at the long table against the shop’s front windows. I waited for the industrial conveyer-toaster to finish browning my English muffin.

To think of yourself or someone else as a snob is to decide first that there should be shame attributed to preference. Should I be ashamed to champion White Heron’s medium roast as the best in Portsmouth? Am I a snob for avoiding my office’s *free* Keurig coffee podules? No to both. Anything that shits out eight ounces of middling coffee in six seconds and leaves behind a plastic husk is the work of an uncaring god.

But I am a snob. Last Friday I left the office during our monthly pot-luck and cookout. The building doesn’t have a dedicated break room or eating area, which has fostered a culture of eating alone in your cube. To combat this lunchtime diaspora, the building manager—a salty veteran of a hundred imagined wars who never yields in the small hallway and whom I call Grandpa Janitor when I complain about him to my girlfriend at home—sets up a massive grill in the parking lot and undercooks burgers.

The rest of us who signed up for the potluck bring in our dishes, which means, because of this office's demographics—moms and people who don't mind public flatulence—there are always two folding tables pushed against each other and buckling under the weight of twelve different variants on bean salad. I like to refer to worktime events like these—potlucks, retreats, afterwork running clubs—as Compliant Fun.

Our name might be the only thing we own, but it's small talk that's the only thing we possess collectively. All of us experience the weather, all of us know from complaining and discomfort and gruff asides about food or lighting or noise. All of us have plotless stories or can recall an injury in our youth. Sometimes we can combine these anecdotally. *On a rainy summer day my best friend pushed me out of his treehouse and I woke up with a broken arm.*

But all of us barely know each other, which is what I understand now to be the reason for bullshitting. When the coffee machine broke, the workforce of a mid-size publishing company on the Seacoast of New Hampshire was forced to view itself in the decaffeinated mirror of an overcast Monday morning, and perhaps what it saw—past the bloat of Friday's lunchtime beans and beneath the cold fluorescent light of another five days in a cube—was something too terrifying to approach, something that wouldn't yield, something not allayed by talk of last night's thunderstorm or today's partly sunny skies. I never caught the reflection because I was at White Heron Tea & Coffee Community, eating an English muffin.

#

The English muffin is the highlight of White Heron's menu. It has the right amount of toasted crunch and is still porous enough to absorb butter. I measured each bite with a precise, Zen relish. When I finished my coffee, I left and returned to work.

The office had quieted. I sat at my cube space. The Keurig machine must have seen repairs because I could hear it brewing a fresh cup. It was 10:02 AM. I checked my email while picking a muffin grain out from between my teeth.

#

VERDICT: I hear it's supposed to rain this weekend. 100 stars out of a possible 102.

The Red Nun Tavern—Dennis Port, Massachusetts

The Town of Dennis's early history is of salt-farmers and shipwrights, of dynastic families named Howes and Nickerson and Crowell. What I learned from the teachers and librarians who could keep my attention, and from the elementary school's capstone field trip to the Josiah Dennis Manse—a saltbox home and one-room schoolhouse turned museum facility—was that the Town of Dennis incorporated in 1793, after “breaking away” from Yarmouth.

It is the most picturesque and peaceful tract of Cape Cod. Whatever you would believe about Martha's Vineyard or Monomoy or the long sands against the Atlantic from Eastham to North Truro, dispel it. Dennis is the flexed bicep, the most handsome.

I went to high school in Yarmouth, however, because the district was a regional one, funneling its three middle schools to Dennis-Yarmouth High on Station Avenue. Up until then our sports teams were separate and embroiled in rivalry. When I played power forward for my Dennis middle school's basketball team, I let the spirit of Josiah Dennis and his rebellion take me, and when we played one of Yarmouth's middle schools, I fouled out before the end of the first half.

Like most towns on Cape Cod, Dennis is actually made up of constituent villages: North Dennis, East Dennis, South Dennis, West Dennis, and Dennisport. All but South Dennis, my home village, touch the shoreline.

#

In February of 2014, the Town of Dennis Board of Selectman voted to formalize “Dennis Port” as two words, eliminating the Dennisport of my youth. Finally, I was free.

In the Dennisport of my youth, the asphalt meets the sand and the beach grass emerges between cracks in the sidewalk like bad poetry read aloud. Townie bars spread out a block apart on the worst road any municipality has ever paved: Route 28. Hotels and motels and lodges and motor-inns advertise in-room VCRs, heated waterbeds, and complimentary shellfish breakfasts. It is a cartoon approximation of Cape Cod, drawn by someone who uses “summer” as a verb, someone who brings Styrofoam coolers to the beach and leaves them there.

Dennisport, DP, or “The Dirty Deep”—now officially Dennis Port—is the fifth of five villages in my hometown; it is the inarguable lesser, quiet in the winter like a snowy thoroughfare and alive in the summer like a bacterial infection.

#

But, every so often, I have to go home for a visit. After accepting my invitation to buy her a birthday drink, my sister suggested that we go to Dennisport, to a place called The Red Nun. I balked. I didn’t know whether Dennisport was still a hole—my assumption was that it remained a blight on the town that produced *the* Mary Higgins Clark and *the* Pink Power Ranger, a town that holds the country’s oldest summer theater, a town of fifteen thousand residents that blooms to sixty thousand after Memorial Day, a town that I had tattooed onto my left bicep so that when attractive people ask me where I grew up I can roll up my sleeve and flex.

I acquiesced and left the house to meet up with my sister. *Where am I going?* I thought. *What kind of drop-ceilinged, wood-paneled, linoleum-floored, double-wide airstream trailer of a dive is The Red Nun?*

#

In the new Dennis Port belonging to my sister Katherine, currently a twenty-five-year-old coach of three junior varsity sports teams at the high school, the roads are smooth and uniform. Boutiques have replaced package stores. The hotels have Wi-Fi and there is a storefront for dogs. Families walk together on the even sidewalks and possess looks of good humor or cheer.

I parked my car in the public lot behind The Red Nun. The fog of memory hung there, half-formed, kaleidoscopic. I used to park in this lot nearly every night of my senior year of high school, walking across the street and across the town border to the Harwich Junior Theater, where I hit lighting cues on a switchboard above the orchestra. That winter we put on a play about Joan of Arc, and I remember feeling a mix of power and heresy at bringing up the orange and red lights on the actor portraying St. Joan, who screamed as I simulated her burning at the stake.

I parked in this lot every Saturday morning and sat in the refurbished and poorly attended library, where I took a copy of *Slaughterhouse-Five* off the shelves and read it in a day. Vonnegut wrote the book at his home on Cape Cod. I knew I wanted to write like him: aloof, angry, in search of a good joke.

But all of that was in Dennisport. This was Dennis Port.

#

The Red Nun is located at 673 Main Street in Dennis Port. It is on the same block as an ice cream parlor, a yoga studio, and the aforementioned storefront for dogs. The restaurant's façade is shingled and unweathered. Inside, the Red Nun is Cape Cod's capacity problem made into a metaphor, i.e. beach parking lots can't accommodate the 430% increase in population in the summer. Traffic is a constant because Cape Cod's arterial roads are one-laned and post a forty-five-mph speed limit. The winter inverse, however, is a landscape of empty lots and unused beaches, front yard fir trees swaddled in burlap to protect against wind. Seasonally abandoned, boarded-up houses comprise whole neighborhoods. Every hotel has one part-time overnight employee. You can drive anywhere in twenty minutes.

I can imagine a summertime at The Red Nun: patrons four or five deep past the bar, sunburnt elbows rubbing sunburnt elbows, limes floating in the sallow liquid of a thousand Corona Lights. The Red Nun I entered on Good Friday of 2015 had a decent dinner crowd, yet it felt empty because of its wide concrete space.

Now inside, I understood. Dennisport's revitalization means that the Cape Cod T-shirt shops, townie bars, and taffy stands were gutted and remodeled, as if they were melted down to reforge this new village, this dream of the Chamber of Commerce. The Red Nun has all this space but not enough tables or booths to constitute a warmth or coziness. I found Katherine at a table between the host station and the bar, next to a load-bearing column. She looked marooned in the restaurant's negative space. A melting lump of ice cream and cake sat untouched on a paper plate. "It's the hostess's birthday," said Katherine. "They're giving away ice cream cake."

"Do they know it's your birthday?" I asked.

“No, and I won’t tell them, not if it means more of this.” She pushed away the plate. The waiter came to the table and placed a slice of cake in front of me. He did not offer to take the other one.

#

It was Katherine’s twenty-fifth birthday. It would be unfair to say that she was going through a quarter-life crisis, seeing as has endured through her twenties one constant, low-level crisis. She doesn’t write like I do, so she doesn’t have the chance to air publicly her anxieties like what I’m doing here—writing a restaurant review as a smokescreen for a litany of neuroses and halting conversations with strangers, old friends, and distant siblings. She channels her energy as a teacher and coach and mentor, molding young minds and trafficking in nonsense language like, “One game at a time,” and “You have to want it to win.”

#

I ordered the masala burger. Katherine chose the fish tacos. We talked while waiting for the food. I told her about my job, the apartment in New Hampshire I shared with my girlfriend, how I’ve been writing restaurant reviews.

She told me about her coaching gigs, the rediscovery of her near-flawless shot percentage at three-point range in her hobbyist basketball league, and her apartment in Dennis Port, a ten-minute walk to the beach.

“I go for runs on the shore,” she said. “A twenty-minute jog on the sand is like running a half-marathon in constant headwinds. Just the worst, but it works.”

“What do your players call you? Coach?” I asked.

“Sometimes,” she said. “Or Coach K or just plain Katherine.”

“That’s weird to me,” I said.

I remember talking with Katherine when we were both in high school—a year overlap when I was a senior and she a freshman—about how we liked calling our teachers by their first names when we could. Not many in our school allowed it except for the cool, younger substitutes, who were still close enough emotionally to their high school experiences that they would introduce themselves as, “Lindsey, just Lindsey, your sub for today.”

“The administration wants my kids to call me Coach or Ms. Marvullo or Ms. M., but that’s Mom’s name,” said Katherine.

“Well it’s your call,” I said. “You’re the one who has to hear it all the time.”

#

It is one thing to grow up on Cape Cod, to live out the school year and spend the summers in the service industry, and then leave when the first college acceptance letter comes in, but it is another to live there as a young adult, as Katherine does, to navigate your early twenties among a high-density AARP crowd and a rapidly dwindling population of kids. Since I left for college, both my elementary and middle schools were shuttered and consolidated in the larger regional school district. Even when I came back for a few months after college to substitute at the high school and get paid time-and-a-half to proctor Advanced Placement tests in the spring, the place felt smaller—not because I had seen the wider world beyond these classrooms—but because we move away from our hometown when we can, and the perspective of things changes.

I told Katherine about a moment before I left to meet her here at this restaurant, when I was at our parents’ house and I was looking at the corkboard above the

microwave, where we used to leave details of our evening whereabouts in high school, and I saw a note on scratchpaper in our father's semi-cursive hand, pinned to the board with a thumbtack. It was an itemized list of life insurance payouts.

"I know about that," she said. "Mom says Dad is worth more than her."

"Do you guys talk about this?" I asked.

"It came up last week at dinner," she said. "I try to have dinner with them every Sunday. It's good for my guilt and their empty nest."

"I saw the numbers," I said. "On the paper. What we'll get."

"It's like the price of keeping their memories," she said.

#

I did not receive a masala burger. I received a marsala burger. The Red Nun's menu offers a marsala burger "topped with a mushroom demi-glaze [sic], swiss, bacon, lettuce, tomato, and onion." There is no such thing as a masala burger.

The fault was mine. I cannot begrudge a chef who read the order ticket printed above his or her station, reduced the wine, added the onions and shallots, finished the sauce with mushrooms and herbs, and then sent it out over a burger cooked medium-rare. That chef did the job. I failed.

Katherine saw my disappointment. "You want some of my dinner?" she asked.

No, I said. This is my choice. I did this. This is my Dennisport.

#

Verdict: Whatever parcel of memory you believe you hold the deed to has already been auctioned off and redeveloped. Four stars, out of five.

The Wallingford Dram—Kittery, Maine

Whenever I find myself growing grim and dark around the brainpan; whenever the counterbalanced mix of good humor and sadness that girds my infrastructure diminishes and cracks; whenever I queue up a nighttime playlist of Stan Rogers to facilitate dreams of the maritime provinces; and especially whenever a melancholia whistles to my gallows, holds fast to my bones, and I write a paragraph like this one—then I account it high time for my annual read of *Moby-Dick*.

Last week, I found my copy and went to Prescott Park in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, on the southern bank of the Piscataqua River. There I fixed myself in watered reveries and watched sailboats shake off their winter soot. I found a bench by an unoccupied slip and opened to chapter one: “Loomings.” If by September I can get to the final encounter—when the white whale drags Ahab yelping toward the briny deep, then I consider the summer a success.

#

The Wallingford Dram is located at 7 Wallingford Square, Unit 101, in Kittery, Maine. It is on the northern bank of the Piscataqua River and is part of the ripening Foreside district of Kittery. It is a cocktail bar in the same building as the Folk Shop Gallery, Lil’s Café, and Anju Noodle Bar, its sister establishment.

Its interior is painted a deep green, like the foamy sea on a moonlit bay, and all manner of specialty cocktail glasses hang upside-down above the fifteen-seated bar.

I went to the Wallingford on Friday, the day I started my *Moby-Dick* reread. The day was overcast but clouds broke away as dusk set in, and the whole Foreside seemed reversed in time, at once faded and radiant.

#

It is a new place, but the Wallingford feels anachronistic, as if built for sailors or the romantic idea of sailors from *Moby-Dick*: ragtag, random men for whom the sea is an escape and a chance at employment.

To the left of the bar is a painting of a ship in harbor. I studied it as I waited for the bartender. Perhaps it depicts Kittery Harbor—I did not confirm whether that was true—and I felt such a malaise looking at the painting that I almost asked to buy it just to store it away. Why would you paint a parking lot?

I gave my drink order to the bartender. He took a shaker in each hand and drowned out my interior monologue.

#

I can't shake the grays by putting my name in a whaling vessel's manifest, nor can I slough off for a summer and comb the beach for driftwood and sea glass. Those are not options now, unless I join the Navy. (Maybe I am not so sure what the Navy does?) No, I am not out of time. I was born when I should have been born: in the late twentieth century with its music and its globalized marketplace and its advanced dentistry.

But an annual read of *Moby-Dick*—scheduled with intention in the Spring when I am stirred but cannot move—gives me that kind of escape, however abstracted.

Depending on my mood, I can relate to nearly every part of the book. I identify with Ishmael, the bystander, whose angst sends him to the sea; with Queequeg, the capable

and foreign *other*; with Starbuck, the ascetic, who would struggle against a conflict of morals and personal needs; with Ahab, and his madness, and his thirst; and even with Moby-Dick himself, the leviathan who ruins vacations and chews apart boats.

#

I ordered the “Northsea Lineman.” It is a cocktail of rye whiskey, single malt scotch, vermouth, a maraschino cherry, bitters, and sea salt. It is served in a champagne coupe. If you’ve ever had a salty Manhattan, or if you’ve ever been on deck as a storm moved port to starboard, a rounded vanguard of darkness crossing your horizon, whitecapped waves breaking on the hull, a cold wind snapping to a gust, the crow’s nest above fading from view and leaving only the sound of your crewman’s whistle, then you can imagine the taste of the Northsea Lineman cocktail from the Wallingford Dram.

I would drink it again.

#

Verdict: Nothing contents me but the extremest limit of the land. Seven stars, the brightest being *Polaris*.

The Lost Dog Pub—East Dennis, Massachusetts

On the first weekend in April, I met my friend Marisa for drinks at the Lost Dog Pub in East Dennis, Massachusetts. Marisa inhabits an outdated version of my rolodex from circa 2004, and as such possesses a foundational knowledge of my younger self, or what I like to think of as my “static self-blueprint,” the unchanged plans beneath the surface regardless of experience and the craniofacial ravages of time. It was the weekend of my ten-year high school reunion and I called her to catch up before the main event: a three-hour meet-and-greet at a karaoke bar near the high school.

That night at the Lost Dog Pub was our first meeting in six or seven years. We’d lost touch early in college. We are now old enough to quantify and misremember the amount of lost time between us, and I can’t speak for Marisa, but I considered our conversation a fragile ecosystem—an attempt on my part to convince her I’m me, I’m still me, I’m Anthony—and so at first I kept to basic plot points: girlfriend, job, pets, hobbies, AM fitness regimen, and recently binged television programs.

#

After we skimmed the surface on familiar catamarans—if you’ll allow me a third metaphor in as many paragraphs—we discussed our current lots, our pasts, our stunted and contemporaneous creative trajectories as adults in our twenties. In high school we bonded over a shared love of nineties Britpop and live theater, wishing that Oasis’s *Heathen Chemistry* would receive a critical reappraisal and that more people knew the lyrics to the musical *Nine*. One day she picked me up at my house—I don’t remember our destination, a rehearsal maybe—and she played The Smashing Pumpkins’s *Adore*. Was

she aware of that gift? Did she know that the album matched my exact wavelength, that it quieted me, gave me some peace? It was the sound of a ballet company rehearsing near an automotive assembly line. Most of *Adore* is ghostly, giving way to a crunchy loudness at its choruses, which is always how I felt about myself: I was quiet until I needed to say something.

Marisa was the stage manager in our high school's production of *Waiting for Godot*. The school's auditorium was under construction, so we staged the play in the cafeteria. I played "The Boy," an obvious stunt casting by the drama teacher—I was six feet and taller than the rest of the cast. It is an annoying play that repeats itself, and unwieldy for its daring. What I remember of Marisa, attempting recall as I drove to the pub a decade later, was her composure, her leaning on a water fountain in the hallway backstage outside the cafeteria, listening for mistakes, and nodding at me when it was my cue to enter the scene.

#

The Lost Dog Pub is located at 1734 Route 134 in East Dennis, Massachusetts. It is a neighborhood restaurant and I think I can safely describe it as a tavern without drawing the ire of the world's pedants.

The bar is a hollowed island with seats all around, affording the bartender a panoptical view of his customers. The other half of the restaurant is a traditional dining room. It was empty when I entered to meet my old friend.

Marisa and I sat at a table in the well-lit corner by the bar, beneath framed giclée prints of vintage Guinness ads and a map of what looked like Nantucket but was actually

the Dominican Republic. I ordered a cup of seafood bisque. Marisa got the chowder.

Committing an act of New England betrayal, we drank Yuenglings.

“Have you kept in touch with anyone from high school?” she asked me after our first pint.

“I haven’t,” I said. “I don’t think I want to.” I wanted to figure out how to say that I want the memories to stay still, that if I were to break the silence of my high school relationships, the lines and colors would change, the easy reminiscences would become fraught with new dramatics.

“Not even Cara?” she asked, referencing my high school girlfriend.

“No,” I said. “I let things drift.”

#

In April 2005, a blizzard forced the cancellation of a week of school and I discovered that we—my high school girlfriend Cara and I—were not so far away from each other as the roads made it seem, and that the straightest path to reach each other was for her to walk through her wooded backyard and cross the sixteenth hole of the public golf course and for me to access the fenced-off service road for Municipal Water Well #34 across the street from my house. The midpoint was a patch of conservation land choked with pines.

We resolved to meet each other at this halfway point after three days of being cooped up in our own homes. Wearing jeans and sweatshirt, I took a sled, hopped a fence, and marooned myself on a snowdrift next to the padlocked water pump. The snow was feet deep, and I couldn’t move much further, so I lay down on my sled to consider the options.

That semester I was taking one of the first online courses our school offered: a survey of creative fiction through a high school web consortium. I read short stories and then tried to emulate them with my own fiction, posting the writing on a message board for a teacher in New Mexico to grade. The week before the blizzard, I read Jack London's "To Build a Fire," which is about a man unprepared in the tundra. He lies down in the snow and falls into death like a deep sleep. The story brought me some peace, and I think back on it often.

And so the story was on my mind when I lay down on my sled near Municipal Water Well #34, too winded to move any further, and at a time when it was easier to tell stories like this because it was still uncommon for teenagers to have cell phones. I let gravity slide me away into the untouched landscape, let it swaddle me for the long goodbye.

"Then the man drowsed off into what seemed to him the most comfortable and satisfying sleep he had ever known."

I wasn't going to die, and I wasn't prepared or ready for it, but the Jack London story was still fresh, and I thought if I just lay there and sleep, someone would find me.

Then I heard Cara's voice and looked up to see her, wearing wooden snowshoes, the kind you might see mounted on a cabin wall, the kind that look like tennis rackets. She helped me up and we walked back to her mother's house. She hopped across the surface of the snow and I slid down the banks.

#

"I remember that blizzard," said Marisa. "I don't remember how I filled my time, though."

“It’s my best ten-year-old memory,” I said. “Sliding down a snowbank on a plastic sled, looking through the white-dusted conifers to see my high school girlfriend bounding toward me on decorative snowshoes.”

Our interests change and our lives take new shapes, nebulous or formed, but our self-blueprints are static. Marisa’s mannerisms are still there. Her voice remains a mix of surf and salt, her laugh full and heartfelt. She calms people, as she did when she had *Adore* playing in her car ten years ago, so it makes sense that she does what she does now: private yoga instruction in Portland, Oregon.

I invited elaboration with a small anecdote (“Cool! I do yoga on Sunday afternoons.”) and a follow-up question (“What is the history of yoga?”).

“Yoga is millennia old,” said Marisa. “The poses we know as yoga poses are constructs from the last two centuries.”

Between the invention of yoga and the invention of the downward dog, no hatha DVDs had been pressed, no books on prenatal breathing had been published. Instead, yoga possesses a history of philosophical unravelings, monastic men walking into the crouching forests and reemerging after months, limber, ready to sit still for three days and meditate. When Marisa explained this, it shook me, and the idea of yoga as a secret, hermetic trance that the West had bastardized with dumb names for poses made me feel vertiginous, unseated. I had a college professor who called this sensation “cosmic distance”—when a piece of information causes you to zoom out and consider the larger picture. Marisa listed foundational yogic texts and I wrote them on a napkin. Then our waitress came by with two more beers and placed one on my napkin.

#

I'm sorry. The Lost Dog is a great restaurant. Great but nondescript. Are you a restaurateur? Do you want to open a place that couldn't possibly offend anyone's sensibilities? Go to 1374 Route 134 in East Dennis, Massachusetts and copy the model.

This restaurant review is about an old friend, and if I lived in Dennis, if I returned here for a living, the Lost Dog Pub would be my default watering hole, an unopposed winner. I promise you. It would become my old friend.

#

I asked Marisa about mantras.

Hers is: "I can only blame myself."

Mine is: "These are small people in small kingdoms."

#

At 8:30, the dinner crowd dissipated and was replaced by a younger demographic, loud people whose platform on personal space is that it's an abstract concept reserved for others. Those were Marisa's words. I can't take credit for them. A man in a white polo shirt stood so close to our table that the waitress could no longer get to us. We paid our tabs in cash and left. In the parking lot we hugged and said goodbye. We promised each other places to stay should we ever find ourselves visiting on either coast.

The next morning, I woke up and did three sun salutations. After a cup of coffee, I sat down to write this review.

#

Verdict: My favorite yoga pose is *corpse pose* because it will be my final pose. Eight stars, representing the number of yogic limbs required to attain Samadhi.

Bridge Tap House and Wine Bar—St. Louis, Missouri

Bridge Tap House and Wine Bar is located at 1004 Locust Street in St. Louis, Missouri. It sits between a dental office and an empty unit available for lease, and across the street from a bicycle repair shop.

Inside, Bridge is a dark restaurant with lighting fixtures resembling vines and roots. An upstairs dining area and terrace overlook the bar and host station. Behind the bar, bottled beers and wines line a bookshelf with a wheeled ladder. I saw the ladder moved once during my meal, not with any flourish or song, and the long-dormant musical theater nerd in me stirred in his sleep but didn't wake.

#

On my first morning in St. Louis, I left my hotel for a run through downtown. The humidity was a woolen blanket across the cityscape, and from my angle the 6 AM sun hung just below the Arch's vertex. My route took me around the baseball stadium—quiet on the last day of the all-star break—and on a trail between the Arch and the Mississippi River. I turned west, crossed underneath I-44, and stopped when I reached the Serra Sculpture Park.

Writing about running is some pretty vapid stuff, and I have little patience for that shoehorned, meditative prose, so I'll be brief about this morning's jog: I did not know where my sweat ended, and the humidity began, and thus I became an elemental, a being of pure water, following the least-resistant path in this new city. With the atmosphere breathing down on me, weighted and slobbering, I knew I couldn't return to the hotel like this, or share an elevator with strangers.

I walked to dry off, and a normal five-minute cooldown became thirty minutes. I was in town for work and would have to report to the America's Conference Center at 9:00 AM. When my work duties ended that evening, I would be free to find dinner on my own, and so at 7:00 AM, soaked through my clothing, drenched to my marrow, I put my nose to the glass of unopened restaurants and judged whether they might be interesting at suppertime. I found the tinted façade of Bridge Tap House & Wine Bar, note the menu's small-plate offerings—perfect for a solo meal at the bar top—and resolved to return that evening.

#

It was an annual conference on literacy. My boss sent me to presentations on emergent primary readers and panels of literacy coaches speaking to standing rooms of middle grade teachers. When I wasn't attending these panels, I was in my company's booth in the conference expo hall, a booth famous for its double-padded carpeting and free espresso drinks. Teachers stepped off the concrete of the expo floor and onto the booth's plush padding, and you could see their shoulders drop, the exhalation. It was like a lapping tide on a still afternoon. The settling purr of a cat when it has found a lap good for napping.

#

At Bridge, I ordered a local IPA and the duck tacos. My neighbor at the bar, a lean man in his twenties—essentially a member of my own demographic—turned to me after my beer arrived.

“What are you drinking?” he asked. I told him it was...um, yes, here: Modern Brewery's “Citropolis IPA,” because when I read it on the draught list, I imagined an

entire city made of oranges, but also I ordered it because I was curious about the craft beer landscape of St. Louis, headquarters to InBev-owned Anheuser-Busch, home of Budweiser, stomping grounds of Michelob, the “draught beer of connoisseurs.”

“Citra is a type of hops,” he said. His name was Ken, and he explained how the Midwest’s microbreweries are producing some of the country’s most exciting ales and lagers as a kind of punk rock response to operating in the macro-shadowed territory of Budweiser and Bud Light and Bud Light Platinum Limited Lime. “We are spoiled with alcoholic riches,” he said.

The barback moved the wheeled ladder in order to grab an obscured wine bottle, and the rusty squeak paused Ken’s talking.

“Anyway,” he said. “The big thing these days is *brett* beers.”

#

Whatever punishment I have earned, in this life or the last, manifests itself in the unrelenting monologues of proximal strangers, retribution meted out for my own passive life. I am a quiet person and the world feels discomfort with quiet people. Whereas I find a cozy warmth in silence—an abstract acreage of negative space where I can decide what to say next—most conversationalists can’t abide it, the pregnant pause, the beat.

#

Ken explained *brett* beers.

Which is actually kind of interesting! It’s easy to hide behind misanthropy in writing online and anonymous restaurant reviews, but I was alone in a new city and so was Ken, who reached across the deep moat we dig around ourselves and looked for an open portcullis.

“*Brettanomyces*,” he said, “or shortened to *brett*, is a strain of yeast that most brewers see as a contaminant because it produces some weird, swirly flavors.” It wouldn’t otherwise exist with proper sanitation, he continued. You can find *Brettanomyces* on the rotting skins of fruit. A 2012 *New York Times* profile of the yeast describes its “pronounced earthiness and occasional barnyard aromas.”

Ken likened the taste of *brett* beers to “a crowded stable or a used horse blanket.”

Bridge Tap House & Wine Bar offers reasonably priced four-ounce pours of every draft. I ordered an ale conditioned with *brett* advertised as a “hopped saison with sea salt.” It was curved with tart and twang, sour and crisp like a waterspout on the boundless ocean. “Tornadic,” I said to Ken.

“Cheers,” he said.

#

Ken was in town for the same conference. “I sell literacy software to school districts,” he said. “Typing games, reading comprehension tests, that kind of stuff.”

“Do you like it?” I asked. I was proud of myself for keeping the conversation alive with a stranger, an impossibility without the help of these *brett* beers.

“Yeah, sure,” he said. He finished his drink and fist-bumped my shoulder. “Hey, it was good talking to you, man. Good luck out there.” And he left.

I didn’t see him the next two days in the conference center, or if I did, I didn’t recognize him, though I did look.

The duck tacos came dressed with a jalapeno crema, and a generous amount of kimchi sat atop the meat. They were good, but how good I can’t say, because my palate was in ruins after the beer.

With Ken gone, I focused on a contraption behind the bar. It was a machine of five spinning dusters, and every few minutes a bartender unloaded the bar's dishwasher and upturned a drying wine glass. He placed the glass on the spinning dusters, polishing until it shone beneath the viny lamplights.

#

Verdict: Thanks, Ken. 314 stars.

Flatbread Company—Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Part I

Flatbread Company is a pizza restaurant located at 138 Congress Street in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. It is one link in a chain of eleven Flatbread franchise establishments, as close-thrown as Hampton, New Hampshire and as far-flung as Maui, Hawaii. It excels in involving itself in the community, inserting beets into its salads, and maintaining a uniform but not overwhelming crispiness on its pizza crusts.

I went to Flatbread Company on Monday evening for my friend Jiin's semi-impromptu birthday party. It was his twenty-ninth birthday overall but his first as "Jiin," after spending the summer legally changing his name from Gene...

FLASHBACK SEQUENCE: GAUZE EFFECT... HAZE AND WAVES

Gene's Lake House—Wakefield, New Hampshire

Gene, ne Eugene, sometimes Geno, invited us to his apartment, a year-round lake house rental for a Saturday evening cookout. The house's former occupant is dead, and the man's surviving son rents the place instead of selling it or residing in it, leaving behind decades of tchotchkes and cookbooks, stuff that Gene spent the first two weeks of his residency packing into boxes and storing in the attic.

We grilled hot dogs and steak tips, assorted vegetables, and doused everything in a thick knock-off sriracha sauce from Trader Joes. Gene's rented house sits on Lovell Lake's southeast shore, the deck overlooking the water from across a narrow, frost-heaved New Hampshire backroad. The day had waffled between clouds and sun—so we put up an umbrella over the dead man's leftover patio furniture as intermittent rain drops landed around us.

It was me, my girlfriend Emily, Gene, and Gene's new friend who we hadn't met prior to that night, Sloan, who—bless her heart—waited until late to divulge that she was coming off a long-term relationship, so the group did not have to collectively shoulder this new acquaintance's baggage through dinner, the bonfire, and the third or fourth beer. I liked Sloane; she reminded me of my younger sister, a person who describes peoples, places, and things as being *chill* to express approval and *vicious* for disapproval.

At one point the sun came back from behind the clouds and it cast a low-angled light onto the lake, and onto a small island in the center that held a log cabin and dock. Emily remarked that it would be nice to live there, “to shuttle back and forth in a canoe in the summer and to walk across the lake in the winter.”

We ate, talked, washed dishes, and then retreated to Gene's backyard where there was a fire pit, and we collected twigs and birch bark as the night grew dim then dark. Gene lit the fire and we sat. I have a habit of dropping out of conversation when there are flames to watch and metaphors to build.

A path snaked up into the woods behind the fire pit, and there was an unkempt tool shed just before the tree line. It rested there at the entrance to the deep woods as the trees framed the engulfing darkness beyond my sight. Anything could have emerged from

that blackened portal—even something as benign as a squirrel—and I would have lost it, a mental tether shorn, like a character in a Lovecraft story, repeating glossolalic words as reality rose above and beyond me. I thought of what objects could appear to ruin my night: A white horse, saddled but without a rider. One dozen porcupines in formation. A hollow-eyed eldritch horror, voice low and gargling, its shadowy tendrils reaching from the abyssal plane. Or the rotted, shambling corpse of the man who once lived there, his skeletal hand clutching the left side of his chest.

Nothing did appear, and I rose to the surface of the ongoing conversation around the fire to hear Gene explaining the logistics of his proposed name change.

“Jiin,” he said. “Spelled J-I-I-N, same pronunciation as Gene.” The way Gene sits at a fire is a pose I know well. Among my closest friends I find comfort in their default angles, their assumed spots around a fire pit. His is one leg straight out, the other bent, so that he can rest his elbow on it. His other hand remains free to facilitate chucking brush into the flames.

I had known for a while that Gene wanted to change his name—which is not a total name changed so much as a reworked spelling for a certain aesthetic, a surface level reinvention slightly less jarring than a neck tattoo—and I have been, for months now, forgetting to type “Jiin” in my texts to him, feeling the same way I feel when I see someone standing at the edge of a crosswalk too late and I drive right through without yielding, leaving them standing on the road side.

#

The group around the fire was all for it—the name change—and Sloane even said, “That’s chill,” her arms around her knees, her head resting on her kneecaps. “Any dysphoria met with sincere effected change is totally chill, you know?” We nodded.

Jiin flung a curled strip of birch bark into the fire. It crackled and spat, lent a brief brightness to our surroundings. I looked back at the dead shed to make sure it was still abandoned.

“There are two levels to a name change,” said Jiin. “One: asking your friends and family to change parallel to you, forcing a new nomenclature. And two: navigating the bureaucracy.”

“You need to tell the bill collectors,” said Emily.

“Right,” He said. “And I can choose who not to tell.”

When Jiin explained his proposed name change to his mother—“*Jiin*, Mom, like denim”—she came around to it and said, “You can do that? I want to change my name, too.”

FLASH TO PRESENT: GAUZE EFFECT AGAIN... MORE HAZE AND WAVES

Flatbread Company—Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Part II

Thanks for coming back. There twelve of us in Jiin's party, and not one had called ahead to warn Flatbread Company, so when the host sat us at a large community table without a wait, I resolved to tip beyond the included group gratuity.

#

Flatbread Company is a tentacular leviathan and I have been to three of its eleven tentacles in my life. In Somerville, Massachusetts, it is a dual pizza place and bowling alley. In Portland, Maine, it is a dockside hangout for stevedores. In Portsmouth, it is the former space of a beauty school and has a pressed metal ceiling that ensorcells and enraptures. It is on the same block as an upscale re-sale thrift shop, a gift store for Celtic crosses and imported teas, and Joe's NY Pizza the kind of townie hangout that has replaced its front window twice in the last month due to anonymous destruction.

A single clay pizza kiln warms and sustains Flatbread Company from the open kitchen. A regiment of attractive men and women—wearing clothing from L.L. Bean's *Roughshod Mountaineer* collection—wield six-foot wooden pizza peels and reach into the kiln's heated mouth to adjust or remove the pies. These people have the only job more interesting than the dough dervishes, who twirl the yeasty, wheaty bread far above their flour-dusted foreheads.

#

What brought us all together—aside from celebrating Jiin—was our connection to a summer camp in the White Mountains. The twelve us had at one time or another worked

there as counselors. We had spent the previous two days volunteering at the camp, helping to clean and open the main facility in preparation for its summer sessions.

That Sunday afternoon, I stained a wood cabin for the campers who would sleep there in two months. I perched myself on a stepladder and kept my knees from buckling, brushing the eaves and painting around birds' nests. The sun emerged from an overcast eighteen hours and, with the help of a post-rain humidity, it par-boiled my neck.

By the end of the task, my hands were rusted brown, my wrists sore from the brushing. When I stepped back to judge my work, I saw the wood grain's new contrast, its hidden and unweathered shades.

#

After the one (!) waiter got us our drinks, I tapped my pint glass with a fork and stood to toast my friend. "To Jiin," I said, "who's changed in the way he needed to, but remained the same in the way we needed him to."

It felt like an inelegant toast, and the words fell out of my mouth like parmesan from a shaker, but nobody said anything except, "To Jiin!" and we drank.

#

Our pizzas arrived and they were delicious, their crusts burnt with care, their toppings cooked and mingling in cooperation with the cheese and the sauce. Flatbread's pizzas aren't cut in the traditional triangles of east coast pies. They come to the table sliced like the stitches of a football: one lengthwise horizontal cut with a number of perpendicular cuts across it. You can't fold these slices as you would with a slice from Joe's NY Pizza down the block. You roll them up like sushi, or you lay the full piece on your palm and eat it like you've blown a kiss.

More than one of us remarked that we hadn't been to a birthday pizza party since middle school, and the conversation turned to piñatas and late-nineties action figures. From the corner of my eye I saw a disc of dough fly into the air and land on a chef's fingertips. The chef tossed it up once more, but then Jiin started opening presents, and I didn't see it drop.

#

Verdict: Jiin is the best of us. He is the goodness that I strive for. One million stars.

Anthony's Food Shop—York, Maine

“The misanthropic attitude is one I am not proud of,” writes M.F.K. Fisher in *An Alphabet for Gourmets*, “but it is firmly there, based on my increasing conviction that sharing food with another human being is an intimate act that should not be indulged in lightly.”

Where I grew up, there was a restaurant called “Anthony’s At Cummaquid.” Whenever I passed it, I thought of what it might be like inside, whether I’d receive a discount, whether they would know from my face that I was also an Anthony and that I was there for a kindred connection. I told my parents that I wanted to go there for my birthday, but when it came time for my birthday dinner I would always forget about it and choose Chili’s. Still, passing Anthony’s At Cummaquid occasioned a moment of introspection—would I somehow know myself better inside the restaurant? If I went on my birthday, would there be a mystical convergence, and would I receive a sense of the oncoming year?

I do not live where I grew up, but the same question returned a short while ago. I searched Yelp for “Anthony” and found Anthony’s Food Shop in York, Maine. I would go there, I thought, I would sit there and eat, and I would look inward.

#

Anthony’s Food Shop is located at 679 U.S. Route 1 in York, Maine. It is a combination package store, pizzeria, coffee shop, and bodega. It is a truck stop from an earlier age before the interstate, when men on the long haul stopped for a slice and a soda, a respite

before the northern expanse. Now, it's a brief waypoint on the seasonally clogged Route 1 of coastal Maine.

To the right of the entrance: a full-service coffee shop with pastries in a refrigerator case and bags of grounds available for purchase. To the left: a small selection of groceries you would find in a bodega, good for spur-of-the-moment, as-needed purchases, not full-week stock-ups. And right in front as you enter, what I imagine is the primary revenue stream for Anthony's Food Shop, the actual food shop.

A number of faux-chalkboards hang above the registers and reach the ceiling, displaying the available food for order: your requisite American pizza and sub fare, from full pies to hot sandwiches to cold subs to salads to take-out slices. If I were indecisive and ambivalent—as I faced down these wall menus—I would feel comfortable leaving my choice to the whims of the universe, as you would closing your eyes and spinning a globe when figuring out where to go on your honeymoon. I ordered the “Real Italian” sandwich.

“Your name?” asked the man at the register.

“Anthony,” I said. “I share a name with this place.”

“OK, Anthony. We'll call you when it's ready.”

#

Anthony's Real Maine Italian Sandwich is Anthony's “favorite blend of Italian style cold cuts and veggies piled high on a braided Italian roll.” There were vegetables, yes, but it was the ham that was piled high, folded on itself, thickening the sandwich to at least four inches in height. Since the sandwich is on a handheld bulky roll and not a sub roll—America's preferred conveyance for Italian subs—and since Anthony's tries to fit a sub's

worth of fillings into a what amounts to a bun, the whole situation is unwieldy. When it was handed to me, the sandwich had a rubber band around it.

One television in the dining area screened episodes of a program about couples seeking to purchase tiny homes, touring prefab boxes and discussing the benefits of small, shared living arrangements.

Olive oil leaked from my sandwich as I tried to wrap my mouth around it, and I didn't take my eyes off the screen. I have seen this show before, and this trend—the tiny home—and I can't get past the artifice and the things unsaid. Two people in the market for a small, modular home are obviously people seeking to live an ascetic life and are also obviously people acrobatic enough to have sex in any cramped position. This is never mentioned in the show.

#

But let's get misanthropic.

Regionalism in cuisine is an exhausting topic. Just because something is done a certain way in a certain place doesn't mean that it is done the right way. A New England clam chowder is on the same plane as its tomato-laden Manhattan counterpart. Maine has its proprietary foods: blueberries, Moxie soda, and the so-called "Real Italian."

In a January 2016 op-ed for the Portland Press Herald, columnist Bill Smith wrote,

Food often distinguishes a region: cheesesteaks in Philadelphia, deep-dish pizza in Chicago, fried catfish in Arkansas, mufaletta in New Orleans, runzas in Nebraska and pasties in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. In Portland we have

our share: lobsters and clams, of course, but also Italians. We're in danger of letting our Italian sandwich culture dwindle away.

Let it dwindle. Let it fold on itself like a collapsing star. Let it blink out and be replaced by something without so much ham. You can't put olive oil on a soggy ham and cheese sandwich and call it a "real Italian." It's a sandwich burdened by its own legend: In the early 1900s, a man named Giovanna Amato invented the "real Italian" at his food cart, where he served dockside for Portland's stevedores.

"The resulting sandwich," writes the local food blog *From Away*, "which today typically includes a thin layer of boiled ham, sliced American cheese, sliced tomatoes, green pepper, onion, olives, and a finish of oil, salt, and pepper, is one of the last true 'regional' food specialties."

I told myself I would look inward for solace, that if I entered a place called Anthony's then I could enter myself, like a labyrinth of the mind, a self-interrogating Escher painting. But all I came up with is this: If my name is Anthony and I can't stand eating a "real Italian" sub, then am I not myself a real Italian?

All those times my father made "gravy" on a Sunday afternoon, using a potato ricer to process cans of tomatoes, tossing in a carrot stick to cut the acidity—were they not real? All those street festivals I attended in Boston's North End while in college, all that arancini, marinara dripping onto my shirt as I pinned a dollar bill to the statue of Lady Madonna on Hanover Street—it was fake? That winter I used the internet to learn how to dance the tarantella—was it wrongheaded, inauthentic? I won't believe that.

I didn't finish my sandwich. I left it there on the table.

On the television, a woman looked at a potential tiny house and said, “This house is just too small.”

#

Verdict: The unexamined life is not worth living. The examined one is just barely more valuable. Two stars.

Interlude: Tater Tots Masala

On Thursdays after work, I go to the Whole Foods hot buffet and attempt to invent a meal that would make my surrogate television father, Guy Fieri, so proud that his unconditional love for me would manifest in a paternal fist bump on an episode of his landmark television series “Diners, Drive-Ins, and Dives.”

Most of these food inventions have been dead on arrival. There was nothing appetizing about stuffing bread crumbs into garlic bread for what at the time I called “inbred crunchy bread.” And certainly no one would eat my “buffalo mesclun greens salad.”

Last night, however, I added chicken tikka masala to a base layer of tater tots and was so excited at the result that I emailed Guy immediately.

“I call it Tater Tots Masala,” I wrote. “Please consider it for any one of your restaurants. I ask for nothing except your approval, in the way a father might pat his son on the head for coming in second at a Boy Scouts pinewood derby event, or the way a father might pat his son on the head for securing a lure to a fishing line, or the way a father might pat his son on the head for suggesting something new and exciting for the family food business.”

Within seconds I received a reply. “Message delivery failure,” it read. “The email address you entered, papaguy@foodnetwork.com, does not exist or is inactive.”

Low-Level Magics [Fiction]

One morning in the spring, I awoke with a hypnic jerk, having felt the sensation of falling while in bed, when I was in fact levitating, and my sleep therapist—himself a level seven licensed mage—suggested that I start practicing spells. If I didn't channel the energy that was fueling these early-AM levitations, he said, then I would find myself floating to the ceiling or, if I ever sleep outside, floating without impedance and asphyxiating in low-earth orbit.

"I don't know any spells," I told him.

"They're easy enough," he said. "Really all you do is flick your fingers around and speak some words. Here, I have a book." He took one from the shelf behind his chair, which surprised me because I had only ever considered that bookshelf as décor or a display of power. *I am a licensed therapist as you can tell from my shelves and diplomas.* The book was called *The Sovereign Mage* and it was a small paperback. "Let's have you learn a simple one now. It should be all you need."

He taught me "water-chori," a basic spell meant to shape and form small amounts of water using my thoughts. "You *think* the spell," he said. "And if you're polite enough in your request, the water will move. Watch." He poured out half of his cup of water onto the office's hardwood floor. Some of the liquid found the cracks between the boards but some of it remained, tense against the surface. "Now I'll ask it to move."

He didn't say anything but instead stared intently at the puddle and flicked his right hand, and after a second the puddle moved on its own to form the shape of an

upright column. Two inches tall, maybe. Then it fell back down and my sleep therapist dabbed the floor clean with a paper towel.

“So if I move water around,” I said, “I won’t float in my sleep anymore?”

“Yes,” he said. “You’ll have used up all that magical energy and you’ll remain in your bed. Practice this once every day and then call me in a week with an update.”

#

The next day, my girlfriend Emily and I drove to upstate New York for my cousin’s wedding.

I am in my thirties and my wedding attendance loyalty card has been punched to tatters. Receiving a save-the-date envelope is now as routine in my life as flushing the toilet. I used to take my coat to the dry-cleaners two weeks before the ceremony. Now I run a lint roller up and down the sleeves that morning, at minimum to remove the cat hairs.

On paper, the seven-hour drive from the New Hampshire seacoast to the post-Kodak part of upstate New York just north of the Finger Lakes is intimidatingly long, and we decided to split the journey in half, stopping one night in North Adams, Massachusetts. We spent an evening at the bar of a positively Yelped restaurant in town, where I briefed Emily on the volume and strength of my father’s side of the family, The Marvullos, who’ve produced nearly two dozen aunts, uncles, cousins, and second cousins, not counting cousins-in-law and anonymous, unknown plus-ones.

Emily’s eyes widened as we ordered our second drink and I hadn’t yet discussed the family’s socio-political schisms throughout the years. This was for me a way to articulate my confusions: how has the dynamic changed since the death of my

grandmother? How do I measure the distance between myself and my family as we grow older and more insular? What is quantifiable about the maw of time and complacency? This was more melodramatic context than what was needed for Em, whose exposure to my extended family was limited to my parsing of Facebook posts.

The restaurant's hosts circled the room and let down the curtains, the sun nearly reaching the horizon and our eyelines, and for a few moments we squinted through our cocktails.

"All this information is moot anyway," I said. "Really the only preparation for a gathering of Marvullos is to start drinking early." I tapped my index finger twice to the side of my nose.

"I packed a flask into my overnight bag," said Emily. "It's topped off and ready for tomorrow."

"You understand," I said.

#

The morning of the wedding I woke up early to practice my prescribed spells. Incantating to a water in a cup next to the bathroom sink, I made silent requests. *Do you think you can jump to the bathtub for me? Could you do that please?* It did, and the water flung itself from the cup to the tub with a splash.

Could you take the form of a cube? Do you think that's possible? Yes, and the water complied. After a second, it wilted and drained from the tub. I turned and began the rest of my morning ritual, priming myself for the drive to New York.

Five hours later, through Albany and Utica and Syracuse, we stopped at Pittsford's Church of the Transfiguration. We were fifteen minutes late to the ceremony

but neither of us were stressed about it—fifteen minutes in a wedding with a full mass is a drop in the ocean.

“We’ll just sneak in,” said Emily. “We missed the pre-wedding mingling part. That part’s the worst. You doing ok?”

“Yeah,” I said. “A little snoozy.”

We found a pew in the back and sat quietly. Emily held on to one of my lapels as I dozed off, tired as I was from the drive on the New York State Thruway and its lulling, nondescript vistas.

#

Later, as we entered the Rochester Museum and Science Center for the reception, I was wide awake, roaming the after-hours exhibits open only to us, the wedding attendees.

We ordered whiskey sours at a makeshift open bar in the shadow of the collection’s wooly mammoth, and nursed a buzz among interactive displays of simple machines meant for children. Though she had dreaded the mingling before, Emily proved herself so charming to my cousins that one of them brought out their phone to add her on social media during the conversation.

“I don’t post very much,” said Emily.

“That’s OK,” said my cousin. “Just want to see if you’re good to our little Anthony... *kidding*.”

“She’s good to me!” I said.

We clinked glasses and walked through the Antarctic exhibit and its glossy plastic icebergs, its stuffed penguins and seals.

“It’s like we’re the innocent bystanders in a comic book,” said Emily.

After an hour, the catering staff ushered us into a function room where we found our tables, named for famous upstate New Yorkers. The wedding party sat at the Susan B. Anthony table, while Emily and I were at the Half-King table, with my sister and fringe invitees, non-proximal cousins, randos, and unlabeled plus-one miscellany.

We ate and drank, and the catering staff broke down the buffet tables like a racing pit crew, clearing the parquet dance floor. The DJ took influence from the directly democratic school of jockeying, bent at the paycheck, and like a sneeze before an avalanche, played “My Heart Will Go On.” Three undanceable songs later from The Cars and Elton John and Joni Mitchell, I left the function room to wander the exhibits alone, the cake-cutting a promised hour away.

#

I found another of my cousin’s two sons by a tank of inert water, a wave motion display that would have been turned on during the museum’s regular hours. The shorter boy tapped the glass case, water trembling slightly, while the taller pressed a plastic red button, the kind you might find on an arcade’s claw machine, bright after two quarters.

“There’ll be cake soon,” I told them.

“OK,” said the short one. “We want to get this working first.” His suit fit him well, and I thought of the cottage industry of children’s dress clothing, how parents justify the expensive purchase of a suit worn once.

I looked at the tank of water and wondered if I could move it, if my sleep therapist would warn against practicing my spells in public view. I don’t aim to be some so-called elemental ravager; I don’t relish the control over water. I have a condition—in sleep, I float—and I must treat it. That does not give me a free pass to bend the will of everything

on earth, even if I could. If you ask four ounces of water to move for you, if you do it politely, then the water will dance. No need to have the universe in thrall.

Silently, I asked the water, *Would you oscillate for me?* No movement. Again: *Do you think you could make a wave, move crest to crest? Please?*

There was a slight tremor against the water tank but no wave. The two boys felt the movement and looked up. Nothing happened, and they moved away, slumped. I remained and tried to understand the obstinate water. Perhaps I was too tired? Too full on chicken satay and whiskey? I did feel it, the energy, half-drunk, nearing the end of a full calorie day. The water was still. I walked back to the reception.

#

I found Emily dancing among the wedding party, using some moves that hadn't yet migrated to the upstate New York scene. People were impressed and cheering. When she saw me, she mimed a fishing rod, cast it out towards me, and reeled me in.

"My trout," she said when I made it to her after pretending to take a fishing hook out of my cheek. "Your family is fun. All my moves are new to them!"

"I was a quiet weirdo growing up," I said. "I think they're happy that I found someone fun like you."

"Come on," she said. She grabbed my hand and spun herself, but it looked like I was spinning her.

#

In the shuttle from the museum to the night's hotel, I leaned on Emily's shoulder and felt a lightness, a softening of the earth below. She held her hand to my knee and applied pressure. I thanked her for the help.

A woman behind us said, “I can’t hold it in, I’m sorry,” and I heard her vomit, a gastrointestinal splash on the floor, the smell following it almost immediately. Nobody reacted very strongly to it; we were tired and drunk, too.

The shuttle bus slowed to stop at a red light and Emily said to me, “Lift up your feet.”

I saw a discolored trail of liquid slide its way toward the driver. I asked nothing of the liquid, saw no reason to practice spells at that moment, and continued leaning on Emily.

#

The hotel had a glass-enclosed atrium. Its five floors of rooms looked out over the open concept lobby and pool and bar, and Emily and I leaned on our shared balcony. Drunk on generic liquor—stuff called “Choice Bartender’s Whiskey”—and sipping from the flask secreted away in Em’s overnight bag, I looked down and experienced vertigo, opened up and flattened, the way a brain freeze feels after three quick gulps of a milkshake—twisted, Hitchcockian.

Cast off from the wedding party, remnant groomsmen and bridesmaids paired in the lobby below. They went in all directions—to poolside, to barstools, to divans beyond the walls’ track lighting. One bridesmaid held up the hem of her dress to walk more easily and lost a flip-flop. She did not look back, kept moving, a groomsman in her arm.

“I’m going to sit down here, Em,” I said. “Would you sit with me?”

Emily did, and we slumped against the sliding door of our hotel room.

“Fun wedding,” she said. She laid her head on my shoulders.

We fell asleep out there in the atrium, as the open hotel calmed and went quiet. I woke up the next morning tangled in the eaves of the pitched glass ceiling.

I Am The Beer Master [Fiction]

First day started out rough. My manager sent me out at breakfast service and told me to work the dining room. I suggested to a patron that she pair her Greek omelet with our farmhouse style Belgian IPA. She asked who I was. "My name is Brian," I said. "I'm the Beer Master. It's my first day."

"Great," she said. "It's 9:30 in the morning. Can you get me some coffee?"

I repeated that it was my first day and that I didn't know where the coffee was.

#

First success! A young couple ordered a beer flight. I recommended to them the following: pomegranate wheat ale, watermelon pale ale, dark chocolate lager, and the flagship Sheraton Scrap Metal Weiss. They loved each one.

"You know a lot about beer for a waiter," said the man.

"I'm not a waiter," I said. "I'm the Beer Master."

#

I am the Beer Master. I have cultivated this rounded gut of mine since I received my associate's degree last spring. What a graduation party that night! I stood atop a keg of ale, wet-hopped and brewed with three types of local barley. I won a game of beer pong and drank an imperial rye porter to the last sip. I made out with Becky the pre-med and we talked deep into the night. I had loved her from a distance since our first Principles of Anatomy & Physiology course, when we dissected fetal pigs together and the low autumn sun sent mellow, sunken light into the labs. We held scalpels and wore smocks among the graduated cylinders' lengthening shadows. I located the pig's heart, but also my own.

During the waning hours of the party we were on a couch, our lips moving and working as one, and Becky came up for breath to ask me what was next for my life, wondering if we could make this work. I moved my hand from her hip but she put it back. We were drunk and falling in love, giving over to those two states in equal measure, and when I tried to tuck a length of her short brown hair behind her ear, it fell back into her face, half-obscuring her grin.

“I think we can make this work,” I said. At the time I did not truly know—because how could I?—but that moment put me on the path I now tread. Look at me now. An associate’s degree, a full-time job, a steady girlfriend. I am the Beer Master. Look at me.

#

On my second day, at the pre-dinner meeting while the executive chef described the night’s entrée specials, Lester the Sommelier stepped over to me and said, “Back up off this meal, son. Dinner is my game. Wines get paired with steaks. Beers get paired with the *offal*.” I smelled on his breath a faint, oaky redolence, fruits and tannins. Then I smelled the grease in his slicked back, thinning hair.

I told Lester that we could coexist peacefully, that the evolving landscape of American cuisine has made craft beer a hot commodity but not at the expense of wine or liquor. Tastes have varied, I said. Horizons have broadened. You are the Sommelier. I am the Beer Master. Let us work in tandem.

“If I’m still sitting on this ’62 merlot at the end of the night because you sold some chucklehead on a lager,” he said, “I’m going to punch you in the goddamned mouth.”

I sensed an anger in Lester. I suggested he try the barleywine after his shift ends.
An old ale, well-aged and slightly sour.

“Fuck you and your barleywine,” he said.

#

I called Becky on my break and told her of my interaction with Lester. She sighed and said, “Everyone is trying to elevate the status of beer when we really just need to de-elevate wine.”

#

During late-night service I met Ana, one of the hotel bar’s shot girls, who wore a low-cut shirt and tight black pants. Her teeth were chemically whitened. I watched her pour an approximate shot of vodka directly from a bottle into the mouth of a man whose wide smile revealed a sense that his dream had finally come true, he had found his Nirvana, his Shangri-La, his bevy of lithe, virginal women and they were here—the shot girls, the ones with infinite grain alcohol and deliberately messy, bleached hair. The shot girls wear all-black but somehow they still gleam, like rhinestones cut from the corner of your eye.

I learned pretty quickly that my services were rendered obsolete with the presence of the shot girls and the late-night crowd. I stood by the side, close to the barback, a young guy who was wearing woolen gloves since he had to carry ice from the kitchen to the bar all night. At one point, Ana walked over to where I was and took a bar towel.

“You’re the new cicerone,” she said.

“Yes,” I said. “But I prefer ‘Beer Master.’”

“I overheard Lester talking shit. Don’t let that get to you.” She wiped her face, but her makeup remained. A dark magic. “You and me and him—we’re hypnotists, working

with suggestion. You can't force a pale ale on someone, no more than you can force a Malbec. We are fringe characters in all this,"—she pointed to the bar and the group of men in untucked, white button-down shirts waiting to order—"In the end, an individual must choose his own path to the drink."

She reached behind me, took a bottle of rum off the shelf, and jumped onto the bar.

"Body shots are half off for the next fifteen minutes!" she screamed over the crowd, just loud enough, I imagine, for Lester to hear.

#

By the time I woke up the next day, Becky was gone, already an hour into the hospital's first shift. I showered and shaved my neck, and put on my quarter-zip fleece pullover, one of four the Sheraton had provided during my Beer Master on-boarding process. Becky had brewed coffee and it was still warm in the carafe. I love her, and my love for her fills my ribcage past capacity, and I forgot to eat breakfast before going to work.

My supervisor is the general manager of the hotel restaurant. Her name is Gabrielle and our rapport is not yet such that I can call her Gabby. Gabrielle is the person who interviewed me for the position. The Beer Master job was created, she said in the interview, as part of the Sheraton's ongoing effort to become a destination site rather than a building of loosely connected function rooms and evening *pieds-a-terre*.

"Too often a hotel is a fringe utility," she said. "A place to put your bags down while you experience the town or city outside. In so many words, the Sheraton wants people to stay put."

And so in the past year the hotel has added amenities to facilitate a sedentary vacation. Group painting classes in the morning. A popular falconry experience on the Port-A-Walk Sheraton Rooftop Deck all summer. Throughout October: a 24/7 haunted maze in the basement, inspired in equal parts by the Overlook Hotel and the Bates Motel. And today: the first in a weekly series of beer tastings.

At our noon check-in, Gabrielle wore her quarter-zip fleece pullover, a shade darker than mine to indicate upper management, and she asked me if there was anything she could do to help me prepare for this afternoon's beer tasting.

"I think I'm ready," I said.

"Have you memorized the tasting notes?"

"Yes, I wrote them down."

"Good," she said. "Please be conservative in your use of the word 'mouthfeel.' This is a beer tasting. Let's show some propriety."

#

I wanted to do a good job at my first beer tasting. I wanted to impart upon my guests a love of hops and barley and yeast, to give them the gift that was given me: taste. I wanted to somehow transplant my first memory of beer onto them, so fully, so viscerally, that they would consider "empathy" as a tasting note.

I wanted to take them back to my high school friend Alan's porch, midsummer crickets chirping in the bull nettle below. I was sipping a copper penny lager. I was sixteen and it was my first beer. The caramel on the front end lingered and held up the malts, like acolytic music fans carrying and passing a lead guitarist. It smoothed out and

ended with a light pinch. It was better than any root beer, better than any black cherry seltzer.

My copper lager perspired through its glass and reflected the citronella candles on the patio furniture. The warm air surrounded my head. It buzzed, swung low over my thoughts. I closed my eyes, really concentrated, and could pick out each cricket from its brother, their violin legs unique to the night. A polite thought rapped against the side of my brain. *Excuse me*, it said. *But could food be more than sustenance? Could drink be more than slaked thirst? Could you instead seek these out for pleasure?*

The crickets returned to anonymity, white noise in the enveloping warmth. Behind me I heard a ping pong ball bounce once, once again, again, again, until it rolled to my foot. I kicked it aside and it fell off the deck into the nettles. Alan came over to my spot.

“Come on, Brian,” he said. “We need a third man. Three on three, boys against girls. Stop sipping, come inside.”

He brought me into the kitchen where three girls from the varsity volleyball team stood at a table, red cups organized like bowling pins in front of them. I walked to the table’s opposite end to join Alan and his friend Chris.

A ping pong ball landed in the cup of clear, pale-gold beer before me. I put down my copper penny lager and drank deep from the first of many red solos. This new one—an ale, maybe?—sharpened and flowed, its sweetness giving way to an increasing spice. It would be a full five years before I understood that the spice was hops, however subtle, and that if you’re good, you can even taste them in a red cup of PBR during a losing

game of beer pong in your high school friend's kitchen, three upperclassmen girls on the other side of the table, deadshots all.

The polite thought came back. *Could drink be more than thirst?* It trailed off and faded within seconds. Alan's ping pong ball hit the lip of one of the opposing team's cups. Someone opened another can—*crack, fizz*—and when I turned to pick up my copper lager, I found that my eyes didn't follow with the rest of me.

I looked up at the kitchen ceiling's ring of fluorescent light, glittering and dusted. I forced my eyes to unfocus and let the gleam circle around my view. Alan was next to me. I don't know if he was paying attention or not. He picked up my beer and sipped it. "Wait, this isn't mine," he said.

"It's mine," I said. "I like it. It's smooth, kind of like a piece of wheat bread, or a slice of cheese pizza on Pizza Fridays at school."

"It's good," said Alan. "I think I'll have one."

#

Ten people attended my first beer tasting and all of them stopped listening to me when a barge ran aground across the street, on the banks of the Piscataqua River.

I was describing how Guinness used to label its stout an "extra fortified porter," and that it was fun to think of a porter ale as a "junior stout" when I first heard the slow creaking outside. The sound grew and crescendoed, like the emergency brakes of a dozen tractor-trailers avoiding each other on a wide-laned freeway. After the grating scratch of rusted metal on rusted metal, we had to look, porters aside.

"My God," said one of the guests. He tipped his sampling glass absentmindedly, staring at the scene outdoors, and a bit of dark beer spilled onto the carpet.

We were in the Sheraton's Riverview function room and could see the disaster from the floor-to-ceiling windows. A football field-sized barge took on a water like a whale opening its mouth to krill, and a puttering tugboat circled around helpless. The barge kept moving, a floating leviathan on the river, drifting toward the shore and then *mounting* the shore, before it stopped, half on land and half on water, its bow pointed upward and its stern disappeared beneath the black surface.

"A porter is also someone who shifts burdens," I said to the group in an attempt to regain the moment. But our eyes fixed on the barge, this new monument to human accident. "You may have given your luggage to the porter when you checked in to this hotel. There is some speculation that the name of this beer came about because of its popularity with London river porters, who handled ship-to-ship cargo on the Thames.

Three Coast Guard response boats from the shipyard across the river gathered by the wreck. Firetrucks parked to the side of the new barge outcropping. We heard their muffled sirens from the function room, and their flashing lights strobed against our sampler glasses. I wondered whether the barge would be moved by morning and quickly determined the best detour to the parking lot of my next shift. One of the firetrucks extended its ladder to the angled barge. Two firefighters rode it as it lunged upward, a yellow emergency stretcher held between them. I turned away.

"You might say," I continued, "that alcohol itself is a great porter, a shifter of burdens.

The guest who spilled some of his drink on the carpet was the first to emerge from the group's silence. "Cool," he said. He took a sip of the beer; his gaze broke, and then he looked at me. "Hey, this is pretty good."

“Great,” I said. I poured him a sample of a stout. “You might like this then: smooth and dark, mysterious like a riverway at night.”

#

At the next afternoon’s preservice meeting, Gabrielle hadn’t finished listing the soup specials when Lester interrupted to ask what the hell the hotel planned on doing about the barge. “Our new ornament,” he called it.

“It’s not a hotel problem,” said Gabrielle. “It’s a public works problem.”

“Do they have a plan for when they’re gonna move it?” asked Ana. “I’m getting too many questions from patrons at night and if they’re talking to me, it means they’re not drinking, which means I’m not selling drinks.”

“I’ll let you know,” said Gabrielle. “In the meantime, it’s not that big of a deal. It won’t affect our day-to-day.” She left the room.

Lester turned to me. “How was your *tasting* last night?” he asked.

“Pretty good,” I said. “Good beers, good view of the accident.”

“You know,” he said. “I used to do weekly wine tastings up in that room. They bumped me to the lobby because of you. Nobody drinks wine in the lobby. Their hands are too full of suitcases.”

#

When I wheeled an empty bourbon barrel into our kitchen, Becky asked, “You looking to go over a waterfall?”

“Nope!” I said. “One of the local breweries gave it to the hotel for buying two kegs but Gabrielle didn’t have anywhere to put it. So she let me have it and now it’s ours.”

I rolled it over by the window and placed it upright. It stood as tall as my belly-button. “A good stand-up table,” I said. “We can lean on it and drink coffee. We can have discussions here.”

“No argument from me,” she said. She leaned close to the cask’s old wood and smelled it. “Doesn’t smell too bad.”

“If it starts to smell too much, I’ll get rid of it.”

“Deal,” she said.

#

When Becky and I started dating, I took her to the Brewed Earth Tasting Room, where I first cut my teeth on the spectrum of beer—sweet, bitter, brown, pale, golden, sour—all of it.

It was the infancy of a relationship, when you wish so much to have another person know the whole, uncensored narrative, when you open the blueprint of yourself and unfold it on someone else’s table.

“I really like exploring tastes,” I said as we each sipped a pint of Wistful’s Panhandle Pale Ale. “I like describing them, giving them voice.”

In the tiptoeing first events of this relationship, we shared our exterior lives, which is what you do: see how long you can skim across the surface before you run out of smooth stones. Becky took me to her friend’s gallery, and the level of our conversation rose and fell among sculptures and abstractions. I took Becky to the facsimile colonial homestead downtown where I worked for five summers, roleplaying as a frontier doctor—a sawbones—and we watched the fortnightly sheep shearing near the

blacksmith's warming forge. Becky took me bowling. We took each other to each other's bedrooms until we decided to move in together.

Becky met me sip for sip. Her hair was still short. "This pale ale is eminently drinkable," she said.

"I know!" I said. "Frontward hops, finishing with a smooth yet bitter malt."

"You could be a sommelier for beer," she said. "Someone who walks through restaurants and stands behind bars and recommends beer pairings. Like a master of beer."

"A beer master," I said. "Huh."

#

I am the Beer Master. The difference between a bartender and me is the difference between a governor and a president, a microwave and an oven, a ballpoint pen and an inked quill. At night, when sleep doesn't come, I picture a conveyor belt stretching from the horizons on my periphery. Meticulously plated meals pass before me and I have seconds to recommend an appropriate beer pairing.

The bottles in the fridge clinked against each other in a constant hum, white noise from the coolant engine's vibrating motors. It's all pumpkin-flavored beers in there, gourd-laced porters and sweet, nutmeg-scented ales. Since Becky let me keep the bourbon barrel, I thought it would be a good gesture to clean out the fridge. By this I mean: drink out the fridge.

I am the Beer Master, the Master of Beer. I sip and I quaff and I guzzle. Three hours ago, I had a full fridge but now look at me: a good boyfriend. I let the linoleum of the kitchen floor chill my body, and I moved my mind from its slackened state to a place of absolute, alcoholic void. The fluorescent light came down on me like a dentist's, sharp

and unfocused. I could smell the bourbon from the oak cask next to me, a faint whiff from history. I saw the water rushing off that old Kentucky limestone toward the distillery. I smelled the sweet corn mash and yeast, felt the heat from the stills. Mist rose from the Cumberland Gap and disappeared under the bluegrass moonlight. A wolf howled against the Appalachian wall and its brothers returned the volley.

I pictured my conveyor belt, moving at a glacial pace from right to left—baby back ribs, risotto, hamburger, cheeseburger, shepherd's pie—and I found my serenity—brown ale, barleywine, IPA, pale ale, stout.

Becky found me sleeping on the floor, one hand reaching for the cask. She helped me into bed.

#

The next morning, palms flat on my knees, the thumping, the endless thrumming—this was not the worst hangover. This was medium-grade. A speedbump at fifteen miles per hour.

Becky stirred in the sheets next to me as her phone alarm went off. Van Morrison's "Astral Weeks" is a great song to wake up to—percussive rain sticks in the lowlands, a bass guitar like a shoelace, and then Van the Man's voice: a cat scratch laced with codeine. *Could you find me? Would you kiss-a my eyes?*

When she came into the kitchen, Becky leaned on the cask and asked me, "You've been the beer master for a while now. Do you still like it?"

Do I? Yes. I am the Beer Master. It is the dream of every young person to be a nexus, a focal point, an oracle to whom the uninitiated flock and beseech. I am that center.

I turned the question on Becky, whose time at the hospital has softened her and hardened her, like an unfiltered wheat ale. "I still like the hospital, yes," she said. "The number of days I feel useless is shrinking. More and more I am helping people."

We both are. She kissed me on the forehead and left for her shift.

#

The hotel restaurant bought two kegs of Hardtown Brewing's Chipotle Porter and nobody ordered it, so Gabrielle by way of the chief hotelier permitted me to raise the number of free samples from one to three. It did not help.

One guest said of the beer, "This tastes like someone poured tabasco into a bag of chocolate chips.

Another: "Like a mildewed gurney."

And another: "Fecal matter poisoning the Fountain of Youth."

Am I helping people? Do I shift their burdens? Not a single patron enjoyed the Chipotle Porter and by the end of the tasting I had a table covered with half-filled three-ounce plastic cups. I poured the keg out in a storm drain behind the hotel. This was almost too much to bear and as penance I drank two pints when the kegs emptied into the sewers. I sat on the curb and cursed the beer, which tasted like a wet dog wrung out into a pot of instant coffee.

I am sometimes grateful that Becky is already asleep when I return home because it is hard to meet her eyes after a day like this, serving leftover beer, the swill of the backwash, to people checking into the hotel. Tonight, she was still awake when I got back, propped against the headboard and reading a book on gastrointestinal medicine. She noticed my mood, must have felt it enter behind me.

“You ok?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I had to dump out a bunch of beer. Nobody liked it.”

“Even the Beer Master has off days,” she said.

I got into bed and leaned against her shoulders as she read.

“Get this,” she said, not looking up from her gastrointestinal book. “Do you ever think about how it’s all just a tube from mouth to butt? It’s like we’re tires. Or donuts.”

#

Lester the Sommelier resigned. A new seafood bistro in Rye offered him a job. “Wine is where it should be there,” he said to me in the break room, which is to say: Wine there is listed on two pages of vellum, bound in faux-leather, when the beer is printed on light stock postcard, static with three low-cal beers just above the soft drinks.

“What if somebody wants a beer?” I asked him.

“I’ll suggest heavily that he consider the wine,” he said.

“But wine isn’t all there is!” I said. I stood up and faced him directly and forced eye contact, preventing him from looking down his nose at me. “There’s other liquor. There’s beer. Grapes don’t have a fucking monopoly on our taste buds. People want what they want.”

“People don’t know what they want,” he said.

I will not miss him, his closed door of a life.

#

Another success. Gabrielle said that I could help tend bar during late-night service.

“You’ve done good work so far,” she said.

“Thank you, Gabrielle,” I said. “That means a lot.”

“You can call me Gaby,” she said.

I went behind the bar and washed some of the tap nozzles. I checked the pint glasses and the tulip glasses and the tall pilsner glasses. I checked for spelling errors on the tap handles. The barback came over and dumped a container of ice into the cooler below the lemons and limes.

A man at the bar signaled over to me and asked, “What’s good?” and I told him what’s good: the beer.

“We have some great local breweries on tap tonight,” I said. “Here, try this. It’s called ‘Demonstrable Ale.’ They make it just down the road. Hints of light barley and white oats.”

“Not bad,” he said, sipping. “What about that one?” He pointed to a wooden tap handle in the shape of a baseball bat.

“That’s called ‘Hoppy Home Run.’ It’s a double IPA, strong but sippable.” I poured him a four-ounce sample.

“Delicious,” he said. “Got any more like this?”

I did, and I poured him samples of the “Krakatoa Spiced Bourbon-Barrel Lager,” the “Submarine Stout,” and the “Session-ender Triple German Weiss.”

When he finished his samples, he stumbled off his bar stool and left.

The barback came by to drop off a load of just-cleaned glassware. He looked at the patron walking slowly and deliberately out of the room. “Did you just let that guy get drunk for free?” he asked.

“Shit,” I said.

#

I am the Beer Master. Come, try a sip. You might not understand. Let me be the first to welcome you to this new landscape of tastes, this unclipped path of strange experience. I will hold your hand, guide your footfalls. Watch my gaze. I am the Beer Master. Look at me.

Days of Bloom and Bust [Fiction]

In brief: This is an unfinished piece of fiction based on my memories growing up on Cape Cod. It changes points of view at the mid-point, and were it a finished product, it would delight and surprise. But it isn't done and might never be done. It is here because I wrote it at Stonecoast and I consider it anti-academic to hide unfinished works.

#

Introduction:

The spring and summer of 2005 saw the worst bloom of the toxic alga *Alexandrium fundyense* since 1972. Scientists call it a “harmful algal bloom.” We call it the Red Tide.

This catastrophic coastal event occurs when billions of toxic phytoplankton multiply by an exponential factor and produce toxins in the seawater. The toxins accumulate in filter-feeding shellfish, making them unsafe to consume. Those who eat an affected clam suffer from paralytic shellfish poisoning, or PSP. Though there have been no recorded deaths from PSP in history, the threat is enough to close beaches and shut down major shell fishing operations. During these blooms, the shores turn golden red and municipal workers erect warning signs on the already crowded beach bulletin boards.

Drugs and alcohol prohibited.

Keep off the jetties.

Keep off the dunes.

and

Algal Bloom Event: Stay out of the water.

No swimming until further notice.

In 2005, the shell fishing industries of New England and Canada's maritime provinces stalled, from the mussels of Prince Edward Island to the quahogs of Rhode Island's Washington County. That summer, tourists ate *imported* shellfish, anemic and overpriced from the west coast or Asia. Oysters reached \$22 per half-shell. The Red Tide pulled the lynchpin from our reality, our clam digging fathers stayed home, our mothers stirred pots of watery chowder.

On the bare, bent arm of Massachusetts—the bicep of Cape Cod—Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School's Class of 2005 prepared for its graduation. Its prom and banquet were on the edges of cancellation for lack of available and affordable seafood. I was a senior then and knew nothing of a world without turbulence.

My father, an educator and clamdigger hobbyist who used the proceeds from shell fishing to supplement the family's income, took a second job inventorying liquor stock at a mid-Cape chain of package stores, and it re-awoke in him a taste for the drink. My mother, harried and domestic, tried to pry him from those alcoholic depths.

Shaken from the broken promises of his future, my older brother turned from the life of an oysterman and joined the Marine Corps.

My sister swore off all meat and refused to touch any water until the Red Tide lifted.

The people of Dennis, Massachusetts walked the streets without aim, their seasons made idle, their livelihoods compromised.

And me—I proposed to my girlfriend with a ring hidden in a clam that I had dug under the cover of darkness, far from the overworked, watchful eyes of her Shellfish Constable father.

These were the days of bloom and bust.

#

1. Ambrose, The Shellfish Constable:

Before his deputy constable resigned and before the shores turned a golden red from toxic algae, Ambrose spent idle moments in his office, just him and his mustache comb. The tiled floor of the town office's basement was his sentinel and it warned of the click-clack approach of visitors. It gave him enough time to drop the comb into his breast pocket, save his pride, tuck away his vanity.

Deputy Crowell was gone now—her resignation letter an index card that read, “I wish to remove myself from the zeitgeist”—and the basement offices of the Department of Natural Resources Shellfish Constabulary remained silent. Few people bothered Ambrose now; they assumed he was on patrol, dealing with this Red Tide.

For the most part he was, driving his white pick-up across Dennis, posting signs on the beaches, checking the harbors, banning all shell fishing until further notice, but now he was in his office for its familiar stillness, combing his salt-and-pepper mustache and practicing controlled breathing.

Deputy Constable Crowell quit a month before Ambrose measured an algal spike in Bass River on a routine water testing patrol. Up in Maine and the Maritime Provinces, the tide had reddened, and state officials warned the downcoasters that the bloom of *A. fundyense* could spread. It did, and when Ambrose found the algae again, on that same patrol, in the shallows of Sesuit Creek, he had to make a call to the town manager, who then called the selectmen, who then called the Chamber of Commerce.

It was the first week of June on Cape Cod and the harmful algal bloom was not relenting. The beaches looked like they were in filtered, perpetual sunset. A dull red foam, almost pink, lapped in the breaking waves. Full tourist season didn't begin until all the schools let out, but this first part of June saw the arrival of the summer's staff: undergrads, internationals with work visas, Cape League baseball players.

Ambrose's phone rang and took his controlled breathing from him. It was the Chamber of Commerce's President.

"Ambrose, it's Charlie. Talk to me about this algae." He pronounced it *all-ghee*.

Ambrose dropped his comb into his breast pocket. "I can tell you that it's here and there's nothing to be done about it."

"That's no good," said Charlie. "I've got restaurant managers calling me every minute, frantic that they can't serve oysters. They're losing money and it's not even peak season."

"They *can't* serve oysters. They're poison right now. Serve whitefish or the imported stuff. No shellfish from here."

"What am I supposed to tell the Ebb Tide Bistro? Scargo Cafe?" asked Chamberlain. "They're going to lose business."

"I don't know what to tell you. I can't flush the red tide. It's here until it isn't."

"What about the clams and oysters in the water *right now*. Will they always be poisonous? If this tide lifts tomorrow, will diggers be able to go in and dig? Will everything be dead?"

"No, not dead," said Ambrose. "We're talking about filter feeders here. The algae's toxic only to us and other animals. Because there's so much of it, the toxins are

constantly filtering through the shellfish. It's a constant filter of poison. We can't touch it."

"Well goddamnit, Constable. The beaches are closed, we have to import our oysters—what are the tourists going to do? They might not even come. They might stay home in Connecticut."

"I'm sorry, Charlie. These are the cards right now."

Ambrose could hear that Charlie was himself a practitioner of controlled breathing. A steep rise, a precipitous fall.

"OK, OK," said Charlie. "Can you put your deputy on the line? She always has a calming voice."

"I can't," said Ambrose. "She quit last month."

#

Deputy Crowell's departure from the constabulary put her on Ambrose's list of absentee women, third after his daughter and ex-wife. Ambrose no longer went to restaurants on the weekend, fearing that he might find his ex-wife leaning over the raw bar with a glass of pinot, flirting with the bartender or worse, one of his peers. He would walk into the ocean with an open mouth and a pocket of rocks if he ever saw that and he would let the poisonous algae take him down to the drink.

And his daughter—he didn't see much of her these days. A high school senior with a boyfriend. He couldn't get a read on that boyfriend. But then, he couldn't get a read on his daughter. She kept a mattress in the second bedroom of his half-Cape rental three blocks from the high school.

Approaching his house, he could see the aquarium in his living room, luminescent in the night. He didn't turn on the lights when he entered and instead went toward the glow of the tank. A foggy blue-green light filled the room and Ambrose thought what he always thought when he returned from work in the dark: that his and the fishes' roles were reversed, the room was the tank of water and his anglers and clownfish were looking in at him, ready to drop food flakes into his environment.

After dinner, he would swim and hide in the fake coral and lay his head to sleep on the unnatural white substrate.

Saco River Running Log [Fiction]

Monday

Short run today, 9:34 splits, a light rain that didn't soak me through but instead rested on my skin like goosebumps. The river was running high and fast after three days of this rain. I stopped for breath on Springs Island between Saco and Biddeford, where some empty lumber palettes were stuck underneath the bridge, clumped and unmoving.

I'm looking to run a sub nine-minute mile before my wedding in May, to build up my cardio endurance leading up to that month when my life takes on a new shape, a monogamous one. I'll be legally joined with another and benefiting from minor tax breaks.

My fiancée is a dancer and when we have danced together—at other weddings, inside sports stadiums during timeouts—I have been unable to keep up, tiring out before the end of the song. Hence the running and its recording log.

She knows the classic dances—the tangos, salsas, marimbas, waltzes, promenades—and stays abreast of the newer trends, the songs that call out moves. These ones I like to call “mandatory dances,” on a simple backbeat, when a singer drops all melody and instructs: “Move to the left,” and, “Jump up,” and, “Now step back three times.” My fiancée loves these dances for their egalitarianism, as anyone can dance to a song that is its own tutorial.

The trees have started budding but not blooming, so while people are coming outside again, there is nothing dampening the sounds. I can hear the river at any point in my run, despite the thumping of the blood in my head, despite the heavy footfall of every

step—heel first, then roll to the toe. Even at night, with the window cracked, I hear the river.

In the driveway I stopped to stretch and rested against the hatchback of my car for balance as I held my right leg back against me, feeling the tired cartilage in my knee.

#

Tuesday

Route the same as yesterday's: turned left out of the driveway toward Water Street, strayed from the sidewalk to do a half-mile of cross-country running on the northern bank of the river, then went over the bridge, over the islands between the towns of Saco and Biddeford, and looped back by way of the train station, following the tracks to within a quarter-mile of my apartment. It's a moderate run, variable altitudes nearest the river when the land angles down at the waterline.

The Saco River runs 136 miles from northeastern New Hampshire to Saco Bay in Maine, into the Atlantic Ocean. The Eastern Abenaki named it *sahohki*, or "land where the river comes out."

In 1675, English settlers kidnapped then drowned a Native chieftain's pregnant wife and young son in the river. When the chieftain, Squandro, learned of his family's murder, he cursed the water: the river would not be safe to swim each year until it swallowed the lives of three white people. Presumably the quota reset every January. His curse is impossible to verify or track; there is no governing body or nonprofit outfit that quantifies deaths along all 136 miles of the river. The *Maine Sunday Telegram* declared the curse lifted in 1947 after a year of zero drownings but I can find no record of its

reporting and can only assume that some beat journalist merely called up every county's police headquarters along the river and asked, "Anyone drown this year?"

In any case it's some racist, apocryphal stuff, blunted by time and hearsay, like a lot of "legends" of Native Americans in New England, yarns spun from an ignorant nineteenth century Romanticism. Today the Saco River is popular for tubing and rowing, though not nearest Saco or Biddeford but at its upper waterway in New Hampshire and briefly into Maine. Average speed is two miles per hour on a tube and the route is cluttered with seven thousand annual recreationists such that rescuing a capsized passenger is as easy as reaching out your hand.

It's something that churns through my mind during this morning's run: a fifty-minute slog in sixty-degree weather, three weeks before my wedding.

#

Wednesday

No headwinds, good pace. Saw a creature on Factory Island, between Saco and Biddeford. It was dead, this thing. I counted four legs, I think, and it died with its mouth open, a mouth too compact for the large number of teeth. Its fur was mottled brown, matted in parts by blood or river water. Its eyes were closed, and its tail was at least a foot long and bifurcated. The body lay on the dirt shore, beyond the upper waterline. I saw no signs of violence or struggle and assumed it was killed upriver, where it floated and was beached here, the third mile of my morning run. Good pace, right calf sore but manageable.

#

Thursday

I can't decide in this log if the river is a metaphor for progress or the relinquishing of control or both. I am running because I am out of shape, or because I feel stillness from the sedentary river, or because I am about to be married and I don't have a reference point for it.

Last month I stopped inviting my fiancée to run with me. When we were stretching in the driveway after a strenuous two miles, she told me that she can achieve orgasm while running.

"Really?" I asked as I reached for my toes.

"Yes," she said. "When you were saying how you would never go to an outdoor music festival and that if you wanted to stand butts to nuts with sundrenched alcoholics you would just go to the beach... I wasn't listening."

"I'm jealous," I said. "Jealous and a little flushed."

"It's not like a full orgasm. It's more subdued but it's the same sequence of events: a rushing, a slower rush."

That night before bed I thought to complain about the fairness of it—that I so wished to be able to come incognito, to have a clandestine orgasm to myself and be able to exercise next to someone and they would never know. I thought better of it, but reiterated my jealousy to her.

"Different equipment," she said.

The next morning, I sneaked out of bed to run alone.

Anyway: the animal was still there today, on the shore. I was sure that some scavenger would have picked it clean overnight, but it looked untouched. It was larger,

bloated from the rain, and I focused again on its disconcerting teeth, its forked tail. Is it a cursed thing? Did the river spit it out?

I ran a twelve-minute mile and bent over, winded, on my driveway. I sat down and stretched right there on the pavement.

#

Friday

What if I told you that the animal carcass I found on Tuesday belonged to a heretofore unknown creature, an oddity, a cryptozoological curiosity that, if found and catalogued, would bring with it a whole host of pseudo-scientists and folklorists with cameras and stenopads to clog my running route. What if I told you that this has happened, is happening, and that the local paper has employed a rotation of hackneyed names for this creature—The Saco Sludge Beast, The Creature of Factory Island, The Biddeford Devil—and that either town has laid claim to this dead thing that is probably a mangled possum, resulting in the bubbling over of long-simmering border disputes and passions. Christ, would you believe it, would you even? What if I told you that these assholes get a deal on caution tape bought in bulk?

#

Saturday

At Factory Island, I ran around the taped-off section reserved for studying the rotting creature. The yellow perimeter reached past the sidewalk, and it forced me off-road. There wasn't anyone there at the shore, just the caution tape and some folded tarps. For some reason the beached dead thing was uncovered, as if its studiers knew that it would remain undisturbed. From my vantage point on the road, off the sidewalk, I could not

make out its forked tail, its teeth. From where I was it looked like any roadkill I've ever seen: furry, dead.

My run was brisk, an up-tempo venture with 9:40 splits. Some days I feel I am getting further from myself, not a result of the blood-rushed running high, but the speed at which the moments of my life pass through me, a speed I don't think I deserve. In the next month I will be married, my fiancée and I will take on each other's college loan debts and attempt to build a life together. When I think of this during my runs, I run faster. I need to get to that sub-nine.

#

Sunday

Screw these cryptozoologists and their manifestation of some dream world, some illusory nonsense forced on the rest of us. What these people must give up in their day-to-day so that there's room for ultrafantastic pipe-dreaming is beyond me. Animals die. They get killed. Sometimes an animal is killed in the shallows upriver and it drifts away. When it comes out the other side, it is unrecognizable, but it's not some god-forgotten beast of the deeps. It isn't a sludge monster.

I stopped at the caution tape today, put my hands on my knees and inhaled. My splits are increasing in time. On the other side of the road, opposite the cordoned-off area, is the small hydroelectric complex still in use and somewhat disrepair since the Iron Works opened in 1911. The rising, rushing waters beat against the dams and locks. A single wind turbine towers over the complex. In the months I've run this route, I have never seen it turn, though there is wind.

Fuck it, I thought, and I ran right through the yellow caution tape. 9:12 average pace.

#

Monday

Treadmill at the University gym today. The cardio room is in the basement, directly beneath the basketball court. Tried to sync up with the dribbling overhead: no luck. In the room was me, another runner two treadmills away, and an older woman working on her delts with fifteen-pound weights. The treadmills face away from the walls, so my view was of the rest of the equipment, but I focused on the weightlifter. She was magnificent, a leaf in the wind—her movements betrayed an inner tranquility, the brief vestige of a mind at peace. At one point she modified the lifting to include squats at every rep—and I thought of my fiancée.

I thought of her orgasms.

I pressed the *random workout* button and it brought me on a 45-minute run of alternately ascending and descending angles, changing from one speed to the next without warning, so that I was sprinting within five minutes and walking at the fifteen-minute mark, and were I going my usual speed—one that invites the deep, floaty *nothingness* I like my mind to generally inhabit during running—I would have built a metaphor about the stresses of my life.

When the cooldown ended, and the machine beeped at me in congratulations for forty-five minutes of running, I saw that I had made it: a sub nine-minute mile on the third mile.

The Sign At The Bend

In hindsight, I remember the sign at the bend, pointing the other way. When we met our group of ten 14-year-olds, Geno and I told them of our orienteering skills—and that we had done this hiking trip as our staff training—vigorous, not too much so—with some fun scrambling and bouldering near the end of the first day, descending from the summit of Mt. Success to the camp site.

We started the hike in rain, at the trailhead—me, Geno, and our six boys—watching the white fifteen-passenger van drive away with a promise to meet us in Maine in four days. The trailhead was a stumpy pole on the side of the road, before a small opening in the brush, and beyond that the path marked by yellow trailblazes without pomp or poetry—a nonfeature of the landscape—and I looked at the boys' eyes, whether they were bright or sunken, open or closed. Here they were neutral, calm.

Guidebooks call the Mahoosuc Notch some of the most technically challenging hiking on the Appalachian Trail, a variably elevating and descending topography of rocks, boulders, and old logged stairways. In the best light, and with seasoned hikers, you might have a four-mile day with an expedited lunch break. However, if you misread the map and have six teenagers in tow, you'll hike for ten hours, past sunset, scrambling downwards over boulders you cannot see, nothing to hear but alpine crickets and the stifled sobbing of your campers, who are too tired to do anything else.

Here we were:

- Anthony: I have asked them, the camp directorate, what they saw that I couldn't then, when I was hired. "Young men don't want to work at camp and

we have a dearth to fill,” said Kris, the manager. “You passed a CORI check and had no communicable diseases.”

- Geno: Co-leader, level-head, once bought a guitar for ten dollars from a shady dude in a Dunkin’ Donuts near Berklee College of Music in Boston. Only days later did he begin to believe that it was fenced, that a student had his guitar stolen.
- David: The first camper we met on opening day. You develop a different kind of rapport with the first camper. For a while, on opening day—sometimes for five minutes, sometimes for an hour—it’s just you, your co-leader, and that one camper. You have to be careful not to bring down the full force of your nervous energy on this one kid, so you sometimes act nonchalant—and in doing so you accidentally converse as contemporaries. Geno and I talked about music with Dave for forty-five minutes on the first day of camp before anyone else arrived. We sat by the cabin and waited, shooting shit about our favorite albums, and when the next camper arrived, that rapport evaporated because now we had enough people to play one of the icebreaker games we had planned.
- Sam: David’s best friend in middle school. They would go on to different high schools and different interests. In future summers I noticed their separation from each other.
- Paulie: An idiot. His body had matured but his brain remained prepubescent. During the hike he stepped right through a bog log—an elevated wooden platform for hiking above swampy marshy parts of a trail—and he couldn’t

get up. We pulled him up and he fake-limped the rest of the afternoon, garnering no sympathy from any of us. I overheard Sam saying to Dave one morning at breakfast that, “Paulie is built like a brick shithouse.” Dave giggled.

- Mike: He was a good kid. He had to leave a full week before camp was over because his dad took a job in London and he had to figure out how to be a dual-citizen. He talked about England a lot on the trips.
- Other Mike: At camp, every group has a “scholarship camper” whose camp fees were paid by the nonprofit parent company’s scholarship fund. Many of these kids come from Washington, D.C. so over time at camp “scholarship camper” became code for “kid with limited resources from a city and who hasn’t spent much time outside.” Other Mike had never hiked, never biked, and for the first few nights was deathly afraid of contracting weird diseases from the mosquitos. Geno and I had to print out an article stating that there were no cases of West Nile in this part of New Hampshire. The mosquitos were the regular kind, the bloodsucking non-carrying kind.
- Francisco “Paco”: Sometimes camp hosts international campers and these campers’ parents send them to learn English, regardless of the camp’s theme. Paco knew little English and—besides farts and boobs—broken English is very funny to thirteen-year-olds. He had a hard time making friends, though he had a good heart. Paco loved oatmeal, which was our breakfast every day on trail and which he called “some oats,” for example: “In Spain, we don’t have some oats.”

#

“There are two types of fun,” said the coordinator during our week-long adventure trip training. “Type One: This is fun, I’m having it right now. And Type Two: This will be fun to us in the future when we remember it.”

#

I heard the first thunderclap a tenth of a mile into the hike. Geno wasn’t going to let us go any further—he moved his hands across his short hair and the orders he shouted were made inaudible from the second thunderclap. He waited for the sound—like a four-story bowling alley on wheels—to pass before he tried again.

“Get off the trail,” he said. “Don’t be too close to each other, but I need to see you. Assume lightning position.”

The rain came down in a single, continuous sheet, just a wet wall for me to pass through, and I removed my pack, sat on it, and hugged my knees.

Some more thunder and yup, there it was: lightning. During training Geno told me that before you’re struck, you can feel your hair stand on its end, a confluence like a giant’s hand closing its grip—a slowing of time before the snap. I stared at the hair on my drenched legs and thought that it couldn’t possibly stand on its end, and the only warning sign I could read was broken. At any moment I would be hit, cooked from the inside, a charred outline of me, my pack, and the bag of granola I was stress-eating. What would the boys think? Who would volunteer to carry the big pot? The tent poles?

Perhaps it was the rain and the thunder, perhaps it was the hubris of a leader of teenagers, but I convinced myself and my group that we were on the right trail. We weren’t of course, and after the thunderstorm passed and we hiked three full miles, a

question manifested itself inside me, at first quiet and impish, but growing with every step: *Are we on the right trail?*

We stopped for lunch at a campsite that didn't look familiar. Sam asked where we were, if was the campsite for the night. "No," I said. "It's the next one." Looking at the map, I traced the trail to the next one, nine miles away. "That doesn't seem right."

Which is not something you should say within earshot of people whom you're leading on a hike, I learned right then. Geno walked over, a bagel with peanut butter in his right hand. He looked over my shoulder at the map and then, with his free hand, he turned it ninety degrees clockwise. "Shit," he said.

"Geno cursed," said Other Mike. "If you can curse then I can curse. Ass."

"Breasts," said Paco.

"Damn it goddamn," said Paulie.

"OK. Enough, guys. Hold your swears," I said. "What we have done here is hiked off course. We need to hike back to where we missed the turn, then take that turn."

"Shit," said Geno.

#

The boys' faces crumbled in the low light of our hike's tenth hour. We summited a mountain, spent no time relishing the feat, and began the descent, racing the rapidly setting sun. The morning's rain made the roots and rocks slick. The bouldering, hopping from janky outcropped rock to rock in what should have been the highlight of the Mahoosuc hike, turned into a nightmarish hobble towards darkness.

Geno clicked on his headlamp in the low visibility. He knelt, sat on a boulder, and jumped to the next one. He held out his hand to assist one of the boys. "This is Type Two fun," he said.

Road Trip With Emily

We were three months into a codified, legitimate, monogamous relationship by the time Em and I decided to drive from New Hampshire to New Orleans, using what social supports we could muster to stay in the homes of people with whom we had, at best, grasping relationships. We wanted to pay our way via meals and bar tabs and, when we could, offers of manual labor for whatever needed fixing or cleaning up.

I printed a map of the continental US east of the Mississippi, and every night after dinner we planned our trip, drawing routes in orange highlighter and marking possible amenable sofas in black magic marker. We could stay in NYC—we knew some people there. And Hailey—one of our coworkers—had a brother in Georgia. Our friend Golgi, né Will, was visiting his cousins in early December east of Chapel Hill, NC and he said we should stay there for a few days, if we don't mind helping him fix up his dead grandfather's boarded-up home. We marked it down, circled Chapel Hill, and drew a line straight west from there to Asheville, on the other side of the Blue Mountains. "We'll take the Blue Mountain Highway," I told Emily one night, as we lay together in a twin-sized bed and held up our map. "It's supposed to be one of the most beautiful roads in America."

"Is it paved well or something?" she asked.

"Oh, no, I think the stuff surrounding the road is beautiful, like the leaves and the mountains."

#

The first day was a torpedo shot southward through New England, through New York City with a quick stop for a slice of pizza overlooking Ground Zero, and an expedited clip across New Jersey, before stopping in Philadelphia for the night, so exhausted that we woke up past check-out time in our cheap exurb hotel.

On that second day, we discovered an invaluable road trip pro-move for young, nondescript, moderately well-groomed people with open schedules: university student unions. They're free of security. They have ample seating. Often there is a coffee kiosk inside, and Wi-Fi that is either open or—by pretending to be a student and turning to a hypothetical peer, saying, “Hey, man, did they change the password again? Which is it this month?”—easily accessible. Em and I spent that morning at the University of Pennsylvania, making fun of the amount of a capella groups on a corkboard of flyers before crossing the Schuylkill River into downtown, toward our first true adventure of the road tip: The Mutter Museum.

#

The Mutter Museum of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia has a lot of dicks in jars. Like a whole shelf of donated post-mortem dicks preserved in fluid. I was standing in awe in front of this shelf when my girlfriend and traveling companion Emily asked, “What are you looking at?”

“Pickled dicks,” I said.

“Some vaginas there, too,” she said.

“Is that what those are?”

They were called “wet specimens” and in 2011, the Mutter Museum held approximately 1,300 of them. “We have wet specimens from every part of the human

body,” read its tour map and brochure, “as well as parts that aren’t supposed to be there, such as cysts and tumors.”

Emily grabbed my hand, not to lead me anywhere, but just to hold it. It felt nice, holding her hand there, looking at early twentieth century brined foreskins. Clitorises, too. I started to formulate some socially conscious statement about how, even in a medical oddity museum, women are tragically underrepresented. There was maybe one vagina for every five dicks. But I stayed silent and enjoyed the moment with her.

Then I said: “I think I might be jealous of these dicks. They’re... *generous*.”

“They’ve been waterlogged for almost a century,” said Emily. “Come with me: I want to show you this weird thing.”

She took me to another part of the museum, which isn’t an enormous building since you don’t need a lot of space to display jarred fetuses and tumors, and stopped in front of a display case of something that looked like a 40-foot mutated earthworm, segmented and the color of a forgotten stain on the other side of a couch cushion. “While you were peeping,” she said, “I found this. It’s called the *giant megacolon*.”

“Holy shit,” I said.

“That’s right,” she said.

It belonged to a man with Hirschsprung’s disease. Also labeled “congenital megacolon, Hirschsprung’s is a disease by which a portion or all of the large intestine doesn’t contain the ganglions to break down food waste. Its primary symptom is an endless constipation that’s almost comical. The former owner of this megacolon was twenty-nine when his family found him dead on the toilet.

“This is kind of funny,” I said to Emily. “But tragic. This is my aesthetic sweet spot: funny and tragic.”

“It says here that they extracted 40 pounds of excrement during the autopsy,” said Emily. She left a pause like a hacky comedian on old late-night shows. “That’s life for you.”

The museum has all kinds of gross stuff like this: a 74-pound ovarian cyst, a “pound of prostate,” a display of small blown glass objects accompanied by the caption, “Did you know your uterus could fall out?” “I didn’t,” said Emily. There is even a display of books bound in human leather. They are cursed objects.

We must have spent the entire afternoon inside the museum, alternating between curious nausea and true awe. At one display, I laughed and Emily gasped when we realized we were looking at a mess of items removed from people’s throats and butts and lungs as an historical reminder of Dr. Chevalier Jackson, father of the endoscopy, who so loved the world that he faced its endless stupidity—its frequency of people eating marbles or sticking cotton balls up their noses—and thought to help instead of diminish.

“What do you think happens when you can’t be surprised anymore?” I asked Emily.

“I don’t think that’s possible,” she said. “I bet for this dude, every day was an adventure, like there was no end to the wonder of pulling something out of somebody.”

“A bottle cap,” I said.

“Chicken wings,” she said.

“A folded-up baseball card,” I said.

“A secret, meant for the grave,” she said.

“Whoa,” I said.

#

The next day, driving east out of Philadelphia toward Amish country, toward Gettysburg, and in the third month of our nascent, still-fresh romantic relationship, Emily farted.

“I just couldn’t hold it in anymore,” she said. No need to belabor the sound or odor of it. Its existence as a brief moment and then non-moment marked something new between us: the next plateau. Much of that drive from Philadelphia to Gettysburg is lost to a landscape of rolling greens and milk farms, and so the first enclosed fart felt special, trusting, like telling someone which rock hides the extra key to your house, or admitting that your family has a history with mental illness to someone who might someday be the mother of your children.

“I am not sorry about it,” said Emily.

“I wouldn’t want you to be!” I said.

“If we’re going to be in this car for however many hundreds of miles... well I’ll say that I wanted to fast-track this part. So now we can be comfortable.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“No one’s ever thanked me for that before,” she said. She looked out at the blur of southern Pennsylvania, before we hit traffic at a bridge over the Susquehanna. “I thought there would be more horses and buggies out here.”

#

The only person who took us up on our constant offer of labor for room and board was our friend Will, with whom we stayed two days in North Carolina just before Thanksgiving. Will went by his camp name “Golgi” and when he introduced himself to

new people and campers, he would say, “My name is Will but people call me Golgi. We’ll talk about that later.” It never came up again, nobody ever asked, we accepted the bespoke nickname.

Will’s sister and brother-in-law had just inherited the house that belonged to their grandfather, unoccupied since his death in 2008, and the man had kept chickens. The chickens had flown the small backyard coop, turned feral, mated and continued their feral genetic line, while making their new home in a pile of brush and detritus that Will needed to burn, but didn’t want to if he was going to accidentally bake a dozen chickens in the process.

We went to the house on our second day in North Carolina, hoping to help enough that Emily and I would feel better about using Will’s hospitality for an extra night. For dessert the night before, Will’s family made us pineapple pudding with toasted coconut, the capstone to a two-hour, belt-loosening Southern meal of cheddar grits, pork chops, fried green tomatoes, and bottomless pitchers of sweet tea. “We didn’t deserve that,” I told Emily as I stepped on the paddle to our inflatable bed later in the night, while she brushed her teeth and leaned against an oak desk in Will’s den. “We can’t carry this debt with us until New Orleans.”

Which led us the next day to the unfurnished, five-bedroom Victorian home in Greensboro to flush out some chickens. Walking through the house to the backyard, I saw an empty, recently repaired chicken coop and a five-foot tall pile of brush, inside of which I could hear rustling and faint pecking. Will picked up a long two-by-four and whacked the pile, and at least six chickens flew out and scattered about the yard. Then we chased them.

Will's brother-in-law was the first to catch one, by the legs, and in a cloud of feathers and cawing, he shoved it into the coop. Then Will got one, chased it to the front yard, across the street to the tree line, and grasped it as it stumbled into a ditch.

Emily and I tried to work together to corner the chickens. They were quick, and flew much higher than I thought was possible. I would corner one by the house and it would fly up and over me, back toward the brush pile. Every few minutes, as a reset, Will wacked the two-by-four against the pile—*THWOMP*—and a mess of feathers exploded out, scattering the hiding birds. We lost one as it flew away across the street and made it further than its captive brothers. I can only assume it felt as free as ever for five or six more hours, in those Carolina woodlands, until a predator pounced on it at dusk.

Another one—looking like the platonic ideal of a chicken: pure white with a bright red comb—flew to the roof of the back deck. It was majestic, and its eyes were all wonky, looking somehow nowhere and everywhere at once. It stood still until Will's sister emerged from the house with a BB gun and began indiscriminately firing after it, at one point catching the chicken's hind parts and eliciting a high-pitched screech. "We're trying to catch them!" said Will's brother-in-law. "I don't want a BB stuck in our chickens, finding its way to our eggs. Put that away!" She went back inside to make tea.

Emily focused on a mottled brown chicken with a puffed white chest, and she and I spent ten minutes triangulating our positions to corner it by a steel fence abutting the property and the neighbors' side yard. "I think I'm ok with eating chickens because they're dumb as shit," she said. "Look at this thing." She approached it on tiptoes as I got low like a bobcat and advanced from what I thought was an unseen position. "You stupid bird," she said, and then lunged.

The chicken retreated fast toward me but then adjusted after I stood up to catch it. Like a cartoon, it left a few feathers in its wake as it turned. Its only escape was to fly up over the barrier and into the neighbors' yard, where three bored, hungry German Shepherds lay in waiting.

I wish to articulate somehow my distaste or my reluctance or my cowardice regarding the actual killing of animals for my own food. I eat meat and I cook it, but I'm not the one to pull the trigger, nor have I ever been. I should do it, I think—kill and dress and prep an animal—because the detached, modern, agro-industrial Millennial part of me feels guilt, and whether that guilt is ingrained from a childhood of Catholicism, or whether it's from possessing a financial stability that now I can think and have beliefs about where my food comes from, or whether it comes from skim-reading Peter Singer in a 101-level ethics course in college, I do at the end of the day feel a responsibility to provide for myself, by myself, in some sustainable way.

So when that chicken saw its options—to be captured and re-cooped, or to use its limited flight to scale the fence toward a presumable freedom—and when its choice was the wrong one, the one that allowed three German Shepherds to rip it apart, it did it what it could at that moment, which was to let out an almost human wail, and time stopped for all of us there in the back yard of a dead man's dusty home—Emily dropping her face into her hands, Will turning at the sound, his sister rushing out of the house to see which one of us was hurt—and I took a knee before saying, “Sorry, sorry, Golgi. We lost your granddad's chicken.”

#

It was on the road from Atlanta to Savannah when I cried in front of Emily for the first time. I was tired of the routine—the driving, the cans of tuna we shared for lunch at rest stops, the supplication involved in couch-surfing—and it all manifested in a teary outburst. “This country sucks and I hate it,” I said, blubbering. “This whole bottom half of the US is a garbage fire and I wish we could chop it off at the Mason-Dixon line and dropkick it into the sun.”

“You might not mean that,” said Emily.

It was dark, Em was driving, and I was glad that she couldn’t see me, though the lights of passing cars must have illuminated my puffy, exhausted face. Our GPS had lost signal hours ago and we were at the mercy of highway signage, so Emily was multitasking—getting us to Savannah and consoling her boyfriend.

“It’ll be ok,” she said. “The coffee sucks down here but we’ll get through it.”

That wasn’t the right thing to say to me in the moment, I can see now. That morning we stopped for coffee at a boxcar diner that was less-than-accommodating for to-go orders.

“Don’t want to stay in the diner to eat?” asked the hostess.

“No, thank you,” said Emily. “Just the coffees, please.”

The coffees were in Styrofoam cups and tasted like it. We sat on a sidewalk bench to drink them. I balked after the third sip. “What the shit is this?” I said.

“I think there’s chicory in this coffee,” Em said. “That’s what the menu said.”

Chicory. I had been to New Orleans once before, in the spring of 2005 after Hurricane Katrina, where I lived in the library of a middle school that had shut down following the storm. There I worked with an organization to gut houses in the Lower

Ninth Ward, scraping moldy drywall off frames and setting aside anything we thought was valuable to the absent occupants. I drank coffee with chicory every morning, and one day the man who might have been my superior—who knows, there was no official org chart—told me that during the Civil War, Union blockades stopped a ton of incoming trade and one of the biggest goods hit was coffee. To preserve what they had, enterprising Confederates laced their coffee with chicory root, in my opinion an awful substitute.

Back in the car, during my evening emotional breakdown, I responded to Emily's optimism poorly. "The coffee won't get any *better*, Em. We're going to New Orleans. Those fuckers love their chicory. And what's worse is that coffee isn't a casualty of a blockade anymore! It moves freely across the borders, from where its grown to where we drink it! They're only drinking it with chicory down here because of heritage."

"It's like the drink version of the Confederate flag," she said.

I laughed through my tantrum then. "Yeah," I said. "You're right."

"It'll be ok," she said, and turned toward the exit to Savannah.

Look To The Eaves of a Sunlit Roof: A Primer For Leading Groups of Amateur Iciclors
Of Various Temperaments and Sympathies

“Look to the eaves of a sunlit roof!” is what you should say first in front of the group. Repeat it, watch them look up to the eaves, then repeat again: *Look to the eaves of a sunlit roof*. As close to a perfect sentence as I’ve ever thought or written. / u / u / u / u /. Almost iambic, not quite. It rolls outward, your bottom teeth grazing your upper lip at *eaves*, warm, vibrato. What other mantra could you possibly repeat? What words of wisdom could implant themselves as firmly as these? *Look to the eaves of a sunlit roof*.

When taking a group of participants icicling—before you can bestow the title of “icicler” on any who wishes for the nomenclature—first impart to each of them the activity’s necessary vigilance. Icicles are beautiful, yes; they are the result of nature’s frozen tears, they are the conical and temporal stalactites of winter, but they are also the fangs of drainage pipes, the waiting blades of the eaves. All it takes is an uptick of two degrees F, maybe three, to loosen one from its hanging and pierce your cerebellum, knick your carotid artery.

“Icicling is the most ancient and calming of outdoor practices,” you should say. “Like a yoga for the eyes, a visual koan.” You can pause here, so as to let the poesy steep like warmed tea leaves. Icicling is poetic, absolutely, and not arguably. “But when we look to the eaves, we must practice caution.”

#

Stephen Morris is called Doctor Freeze because of his research on icicles. A professor of physics at the University of Toronto, Morris told the Washington Post in 2006 that,

“Despite seeing them all the time, icicles are actually poorly understood.” Morris is an icicle expert, a true icicler.

#

To introduce icicles to a group, you can say, “An icicle can be many things: a thin, shiny strip of plastic on a Christmas tree, a holiday ornament. It can be the subject of a poignant close-up in an art-house film to portray the passage of time from winter to spring. But at its most basic definition, an icicle is a hanging, tapering piece of ice formed by the freeze of dripping water.”

If someone in your group asks, “But when does it form?” you can say this:

“Good question. It forms during below-freezing weather when the sun’s rays or a poorly insulated building melt rooftop ice and snow, which then refreezes as it drips away toward exposure.”

Then, pivot. Deliver another warning.

“The weight of an icicle can damage the structural integrity of a building’s eaves. It can collapse a roof.”

#

In the Russian winter of 2010, five St. Petersburg residents died by icicle. Eleven city officials lost their jobs because of perceived negligence. Valentina Matviyenko, the municipal governor at the time, said, “They [icicles] should be removed with lasers or steam. If experts throw up their hands and say that icicles should be removed using crowbars, then we will use crowbars.”

#

When you come to your first eave with the group, ask them to look at the icicle, truly *look* at it. “Consider its taper, its sheen, its ripples, the rings of its age, each representing five minutes and thirty-eight seconds of drippage.”

If they are adults, and you judge them to be open, intellectual, and introspective, then you can ask them to think of what in their lives takes about five minutes and thirty-eight seconds. Dishes? Morning routine of teeth brushing and shaving? Masturbation?

“That’s a year to an icicle,” you can say.

#

Here’s Doctor Freeze again, lying outright: “Icicles are harmless and picturesque winter phenomena, familiar to anyone who lives in a cold climate.”

#

If your group of amateur iciclors are especially open-minded, then you can tell them how the early winter of 2017 was proving to be a disappointment to you. You can tell them how you left the apartment to another unseasonably warm afternoon, for a quick icicling stroll—hoping to note each pointed dangler, each curved blade of ice, wind-shaped and still—but the eaves were void.

Tell them about how February arrived, how Eliot was wrong when he labeled April the cruelest month. Surely it is February, shortest in days but longest in psychological carnage, cruel only in its ceaseless and unchanging weather. February, the third month of winter with no visible end.

#

In “Return to Tipasa,” Albert Camus wrote, “In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer.” This is not a good quote for icicling.

#

Tell them about the week that Maine hosted three snowstorms, two of which reached blizzard conditions, and that in the days between the storms, the sun came out, and your icicling season began in earnest.

“Look to the eaves,” you can say. “Look to them, wondering. Look on, look on, look on.”

Then allow the group to disburse. Take no donations.

The Morning of My Wedding

On the morning of my wedding, I threw up in the shower after realizing that I had forgotten my white shirt at home. I cleaned myself and then went downstairs to find my groomsman Adam in the kitchen of our rented house. “Can you drive me back to my apartment?” I asked. “And can we stop for some Gatorade on the way?”

We call Adam “Boots” so hereafter I’ll refer to him as such. He drove me the twenty miles north back to Saco in his humble blue pickup truck. There was a CB radio in the cab. I asked him if he had a handle, like a truck driver.

“Boots,” I guess,” he said. “I don’t use it. It might not work.”

Challenge accepted. I unhooked the black microphone from its base. The plastic coiling looped around itself, tangled from underuse. When I was a kid, my parents had a rotary phone and one of the greatest pleasures of my young life was letting out the snarls of the receiver’s spiral cord. I did as much in Boots’s truck and hummed a low note of satisfaction.

We passed a police car behind an overpass on the southbound side of the highway. I know a little bit of CB radio trucker slang as part of my lifelong goal to replace any important information in my mind—information like basic household maintenance or self-prepared taxes—with endless, apocryphal trivia, the kind of one-use tidbits for a daily double on Jeopardy! should I ever pass the contestant audition.

“Breaker, breaker,” I said into the mic. “We got a bear trap¹ on mile ten of 95 South. Watch your six. This is Boots. Ten-seven.”

¹ Cop speed trap

A voice came on over the scratchy waves. “Cool it, bucket mouth²,” it said.

I held the microphone to my chest like you do with a phone when you don’t want to be audible on the other end. “*Bucket mouth*—what does that mean?” I asked Boots.

“I don’t know, man,” he said. “Turn that off. We’re going to get in trouble.”

“Ten-four, old buddy,” I said, and placed the microphone back on the radio’s base.

“Is this your exit?” asked Boots.

“Yeah, this one,” I said.

² Someone who will not shut up.

The Search for Summer's Song

I stopped going to the gas station closest to my apartment because it began playing unskippable advertisements on the pumps while I refilled my tank. The first time I experienced the videos on the pumps, I thought they were benign because they showed the weekend's forecast and a word-of-the-day slide (that day: loquacious) in front of some inoffensive public domain elevator music. Surely it was OK to pump gas and get the weather and an expanded vocabulary; in fact, I left the pump heartened that someone might use a new word in conversation that day—a horizon broadened, an intellect deepened.

But the next time, perhaps after some strategic marketing meetings over lunch in tall metropolitan buildings with reflective glass and open floorplans, the pumps played celebrity gossip and hockey bloopers. There wasn't an opt-out button, no mute, no volume knob. The only way to stop it was to stop pumping gas so that the screen could interrupt the content to ask if you wanted a receipt. I am not against celebrities, I am not against gossip or sports or dudes getting hit in the crotch with a hockey stick. I am against these things when I have no other choice, when they present themselves unbidden at my threshold. And so pumping gas at this station became a hostage situation, a late-capitalist violation of my right to tell marketing to shut the fuck up.

There is another gas station nearby that is always one or two cents more per gallon and I go there now, because no one else does, because it forces nothing on me, because for the ninety seconds it takes to fill up my tank I like to lean against the side of my car, place my feet on the concrete base of the pump, and zone out. I get a good stare

going, alternating between an unfocused blot in the distance and the numbers ticking up in front of me. Here the cost of tranquility is low; the difference between solitude and the hell of other people is merely two cents per gallon. I am happy to pay the cost.

But, as often happens, the bill came due. In mid-June I was attempting that Zen emptiness at the slightly more expensive gas station when a minivan parked on the opposite side of the pump. It didn't park like you would in any other car—lining the rear of it up with the nozzle—no, the minivan's nose was at the pump, and it broke me from my stare because I thought I was looking at a new kind of car with a gas tank in the front, that I was about to see someone pop the hood and stick the nozzle directly into the engine. Efficient, I thought. Dangerous, yeah, but efficient.

A woman in a beige sweater and an ankle-length floral print dress got out of the passenger seat, walked around the front, and approached me. She had a kind, familiar face, one that reminded me of a kindergarten teacher, or a librarian, or a compassionate speech and language pathologist who would make a point of praising you for your work on eliminating your stutter, even though you don't care about progress because you care only for the end result: speaking freely. Still, it would feel good that someone noticed.

"You look like you're having a calm moment," said the woman.

"I guess I am," I said.

"Can I interest you in some uplifting literature?" She held out a brochure. Its title was *Will It Never End? Finding God After Suffering*.

"Oh," I said. "No, thank you."

"OK!" she said, and got back into her minivan and left.

At work, I told one of my coworkers what had happened. “I got proselytized to at the gas station this morning,” I said.

“Kind of a weird spot to do God’s work,” she said.

“Do I look particularly despairing? Do I look sad?”

“No, you don’t,” she said without looking up.

#

Three days after we returned from our honeymoon in June, Emily left for her six-month graduate school fieldwork assignment in another state. It was three hours away. The first week was fine without her; I ate salads and remembered to clean the cats’ litterboxes. By the second week I was experimenting with bourbon cocktails, discovering which one would get me the drunkest and sleepest in the fastest time. By the third week, I searched for *Will It Never End? Finding God After Suffering* on the internet.

During one of our nightly video chats that were becoming a routine, I told Emily about the pamphlet. “It’s four pages,” I said. “And it’s from the Jehovah’s Witnesses.”

“I think suffering ends,” she said, talking past me, or above me. “Not like when you die, but it increases and decreases throughout your life, and one day it’s finished.”

She was where she had been the last few video calls: in the upstairs office-slash-guestroom of her sister’s Rhode Island apartment, where she was staying for the duration of the fieldwork assignment. Behind her were peeling sticky notes on a large monitor her sister uses for a computer programming job. “C++ is A++,” read one. “Dump dead code,” read another. Emily was sitting on an inflatable mattress. I recognized her pillow and thought for a quick melodramatic second about my own empty bed, wife-less and pillow-less.

“Disagree,” I said. “Look at our situation.” I sipped my drink off-screen. It was the terminus of my bourbon experimentation: whiskey and ice in a Collins glass. That was the easiest to make, the easiest to drink. What a waste of time the previous week had been.

“Only three more months of this,” she said. “Then I’ll be back.”

“Yeah,” I said.

#

The publishing arm of the Jehovah’s Witnesses is called The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania. It produces *The Watchtower*, one of the most widely circulated and translated publications in the world. *The Watchtower’s* companion organ is called *Awake!*, with a bimonthly circulation of about 6.5 million—which is all to say that *Will It Never End?* is not some one-off zine printed in the public library with whatever dimes you could find underneath your couch that month. No, it is the supplement to a magazine empire that makes Conde Nast and Time, Inc. flinch³.

Will It Never End? is four pages and I downloaded it as a PDF from jw.org. Its first page features an illustration of a woman clearly suffering, holding her head in her hands in the manner of a depression medication commercial, her face in anguish.

Underneath her is a two-part multiple-choice question:

Will suffering ever end? Would you say...

- *Yes?*
- *No?*
- *Maybe?*

³ Alternate, more obtuse joke: “...it is the supplement to a magazine empire that makes 1995 Conde Nast look like 2015 Conde Nast.”

No, I answered to myself. Suffering is a part of existence; the same way hot dogs are a part of gas station menus. Suffering begets the opposite parts of life, which is what I told myself after calls with Emily, to convince myself that my nascent marriage—now a long-distance relationship—wasn't crumbling into nothing, wasn't disappearing before me. Surely, after my wife returned from field work, our lives would continue uninterrupted, lovingly and without so much emotional suffering.

Will It Never End?'s interior features a second illustration, this one of a man smiling as he reads a book, while a mosaic of suffering unfolds beneath him: a screaming firefighter, two people hugging in mourning, and a soldier with a flamethrower, setting the jungle ablaze. The rest of the brochure cites Bible verses relevant to its message.

#

One night, Emily called to tell me she found *Will It Never End? Finding God After Suffering* in her sister's mailbox that day.

"Did you mail this to me?" she asked.

"No," I said. "Do you think I converted?"

"You might have," she said.

I didn't, but if I were someone who valued coincidences and serendipity as glimpses of divinity, then yes, I would be open to it. Primed for a new devotion. And if I were someone who had the resources and energy of evangelism, then I would target people like me: sad, tired, and possessing of a loneliness so precipitous and deep that I wasn't sure what it would take to claw myself back.

#

When I was seventeen, the local Jehovah's Witnesses built a new Kingdom Hall close to my house. In a matter of weeks, it became routine to see modestly dressed individuals with pamphlets walking the block and knocking on front doors.

That summer I took a job as a morning camp counselor in the neighborhood playground, and every day at noon, after I had finished playing kickball and making tie-dye shirts and yelling at eight-year-olds to stop climbing up the slide, I would ride my bike back home, turn on the tv in the living room, lower the blinds, pop open an IBC root beer, and watch reruns of 90s sketch comedy shows while getting into the real work of eating a few bags of russet potato chips at a time. I loved the russets. It was like they took all the burnt chips from the regular bags and placed them aside just for me.

My parents and sister weren't normally home on summer afternoons, so I usually had the place to myself. One afternoon I saw through the blinds two people walk up my driveway and around to the front door, where they rang the doorbell and waited. I didn't get up. After thirty seconds they rang again.

The window nearest the front door was open and I hadn't lowered its blinds all the way—because it was summer and even afternoon agoraphobes like myself are capable of sweating—and from the couch I addressed the two people.

"What's up?" I said, startling them.

One of the people bent down and looked through the window screen and I saw that he was wearing a white button-up shirt, no tie. His companion was a woman with an ankle-length dress and a pale blue cardigan sweater.

“Hi!” said the man. “We’re here on this brief call to share an important message with you. Would you agree that there is more happiness in giving than there is in receiving?”

“Aren’t you guys hot out there?” I asked.

“We’re comfortable,” said the woman. “Are you?”

“I’m fine in here,” I said.

“Are you happy?” asked the man. “Truly happy?”

“I don’t know, man, yeah,” I said.

The man held a pamphlet to the window. “Would you be interested in some uplifting literature?”

#

When Emily returned home, I let out an exhale that lasted fifteen minutes. I hugged her and said, “If you want this hug to end then you’ll have to pry it from my cold, dead hands.” I bought her a shiny metallic helium balloon that was square-shaped and read *Welcome Home!* I wrote her a note, thanking her for returning. I went to the fancy cheese section of Trader Joes, picked out her favorite soft cheeses, and arranged a cheese platter that would have broken Instagram.

Emily held out a pamphlet for me when our hug was over. It was her copy of *Will It Never End? Finding God After Suffering*. “I saved this for you,” she said.

I looked at it again. It was the same as mine: the anguished woman on the front, the interior color illustrations. Except that when I looked at the picture of the smiling man, reading his Bible, while the tornado of suffering ravaged the scenes beneath him, I

saw that there was no soldier with a flamethrower, no forest blaze. It was a fireman with a spraying hose, putting out a house fire.

Epilogue: Food and Drink

Much of my wife Emily's food and drink tastes err on the side of—I'm trying to be diplomatic here, Em—*grandmotherly*. Currently we have in our fridge a twelve-pack of plain seltzers and in our cupboard two bags of "original flavor" Goldfish crackers, purchased on a BOGO Market Basket sale.

In the morning, if she can spare the time before work, Emily will cook a soft-boiled egg. But because neither of us can get up at the first alarm, our AM routine compresses and we end up scrambling to eat breakfast, which for the past month has been toast with spreadable cheese.

Our grandchildren won't look forward to visits if we keep up this bland kitchen stock, this plain and mild flavor personality profile. Yesterday I looked at a head of cabbage and thought, "You know what—I could boil this up."

My paternal grandmother had a reliable inventory of candies with no certain sell-by date. I ate them regardless of their staleness, savoring each pinstripe mint and concrete-hard caramel cream. She had a bubble gum machine that had been modified so that it didn't need nickels to dispense the goods, and my sister and I figured out that the perfect Christmas gift for her was a refill pack of bubble gumballs so that on every visit we would have gum to chew.

I hope to have such industrious grandchildren when the time comes, because Em and I will need them.

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